

When They Drink: Deconstructing Collegiate drinking

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The second monograph in the —When They Drink‖
series exploring the issue of campus drinking

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Introduction

Early in the 1957 Sidney Lumet Film *12 Angry Men*, 12 jurors retire to the jury room to deliberate on the fate of an 18-year-old male accused of murder. They begin their charge by taking a straw poll in order to see where the jury stands on the defendant's guilt or innocence. The audience is led to believe that the verdict may be quick in coming as the first 11 opinions are expressed. We sense the building anticipation of the jurors with each successive vote of "Guilty." It is the lone dissenting vote of, "Not guilty," that dashes all hopes for a speedy end to the proceedings and obligates the jury to further deliberation: The group's upset with this lone dissenting juror is palpable. Interestingly, that lone dissenting vote is not cast by a juror convinced of the defendant's innocence, but rather because a vote of "not guilty" would obligate the jury to further deliberate the facts, thereby rendering a more informed decision. Justice would not be served by a harried vote based on the subjective interpretations of the trial proceedings as observed by 12 individuals. On the contrary, justice could only be served by a concerted effort that would enable the disparate views of 12 individuals—men with their own personal set of lenses through which they each viewed the facts of the case—to be set aside in the pursuit of a consensus based on an objective interpretation of the facts.

In short, the opening scene of this classic film suggests to the audience that each individual member of the jury believed he knew the truth and therefore no further deliberation was necessary before rendering a verdict. Yet, because one juror—someone focused on the big picture even though holding the same impression of guilt held by his peers—deemed it necessary to act on the facts of the case rather than react to a superficial interpretation of them, the jury is forced to understand their significance rather than to simply assume their meaning.

A trial of sorts has been conducted these past 12 to 15 years in higher education. As in *12 Angry Men*, there are victims—student deaths, injuries, academic failures, sexual assaults, and violence to name the more obvious. There is a defendant—collegiate drinking. There is also considerable evidence to suggest the defendant's culpability in the victims' plight. And as in the film, although considerable, that evidence is essentially circumstantial. The jurors in this trial have come from the ranks of parents, student affairs professionals, campus security, prevention specialists, community residents, psychologists, faculty, and students. But like the jury in *12 Angry Men*, has the higher education jury taken an initial straw poll and is a verdict about to be rendered without having taken that step back to consider the big picture or, as Paul Harvey used to say in his syndicated radio broadcasts, "the rest of the story"? Are the jurors in *this case* about to cast a vote based on an interpretation of the facts as seen from an idiosyncratic perspective? And does one of those jurors need to vote, "not guilty" if for no other reason than to open the discussion to look at the big picture?

To date, it has been argued that responsibility for the problem of underage and high-risk or dangerous collegiate drinking has resided in one or both of two broad camps. First, individual students and the choices they make are irresponsible as they pursue a cultural phenomenon; at best simply drinking too much and at worst, being irresponsible in their egoism and hedonistic

pursuit of immediate gratification. Second, the lack of attention to environmental management where each member of the collegiate community believes it the responsibility of someone else to address the "drinking problem." The two foci of responsibility quite literally represent "internal" and "external" loci of control. Attempts to address these twin areas of focus have yielded evidenced-based strategies designed to reduce high-risk and dangerous drinking along with several promising practices likely to result in changes in the campus drinking culture.

Yet as promising as these interventions may be, does mitigating the results of a perceived cultural phenomenon obviate an understanding of that phenomenon that might otherwise result in steps that would result in a change in the campus drinking culture at its very source? If we had a cure for all forms of cancer, would this negate the significance of identifying its prevention? As a colleague once told me in 1973 when I shared my concern about his smoking, "By the time I get the disease, they will have found the cure." Regarding addiction, such a belief is correctly perceived as denial; regarding a cultural phenomenon, it is heralded by some as the justification for declaring the issue of collegiate drinking under control. Like Charles H. Duell, director of the U.S. Patent Office in 1899, who suggested to then President William McKinley, that the Patent Office close, claiming, "Everything that can be invented has already been invented," have we truly learned all there is to be known about collegiate drinking and the factors that shape its evolution?

What if there is a third possible contributor to the issue of high-risk collegiate drinking? What if in addition to addressing the post-drinking choices that individual students make about consuming and/or attending to the environmental issues that affect collegiate drinking there is a third factor, one less obvious but nonetheless influential, one that affects the course of collegiate drinking? Not unlike the prediction of a physicist that an unseen body exists in space because its gravitational influence on other observable bodies can be measured, what if a heretofore-absent factor of collegiate drinking were to be identified? What if we were able to truly understand high-risk and dangerous student drinking, recognizing the antecedents to "errant" student behavior? Instead of attempting to understand collegiate drinking via inductive or *a posteriori* reasoning, what if we attended to the meaning students give to alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior, two of the more prodigious symbols of contemporary collegiate life that, via *a priori* or deductive reasoning?

As Sondra Anice Barnes once wrote, "It is so hard when I have to [change], and so easy when I want to." Can higher education move further and faster in its quest to change high-risk and dangerous collegiate drinking by pursuing a resolution of the quandary, "what is it about alcohol and drinking that are so alluring to so many collegians" rather than trying to "solve the problem" of college student drinking? Like a well-intentioned camper trying to stomp out a campfire only to broadcast embers that start separate and myriad fires, does an exclusive focus on "the problem" obviate the pursuit of a resolution of the "collegiate drinking question"?

It is the purpose of this monograph to explore this very question. Although a synopsis of what has been discovered about individual student and environmental factors affecting collegiate drinking will be presented, there are literally scores of books and a myriad of journal articles that have been published on collegiate drinking in the past decade. This monograph will rather direct its attention to the issue of the meaning ascribed to alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior by contemporary college students. If we can understand the meaning of these icons of contemporary collegiate life, then we can consider how best to affect those meanings. And if students can be invited to change the meaning they ascribe to alcohol and drinking, then will

they not change their own behavior... and willingly? We know this happens already because we observe it over the entirety of a college career; it is referred to in the literature as the *maturing out phenomenon*. But this naturally occurring phenomenon happens over a protracted college career for the traditionally aged college student, a period of time sufficient for the scores of untoward drinking-related incidents to occur that are reported in the press each academic year. If we in higher education can more thoroughly understand the process by which this *maturing out* happens naturally, might we be able to hasten the process? That is what this monograph will explore.

Case Study

By way of beginning this consideration of collegiate drinking, let's introduce a quasi-mythical college student, Phyllis. Phyllis—an aggregate of several students known by the author and presented, as a single case in order to shield the identity of each—is a scholarship athlete. She was in the second quintile of her high school graduating class with a combined SAT score of 1789. Although a good student, playing collegiate soccer at a Division I school was Phyllis' primary reason for attending college.

In high school, Phyllis had an active social life and counted numerous individuals among her circle of friends. Although not in a romantic relationship upon beginning school, she dated regularly and looked forward to a continued active social life that included dating in college. She reported having alcohol for the first time, aside from wine occasionally at holiday dinners or a sip of her grandfather's beer on special family occasions, when she was sixteen. When asked about this experience, she indicated that it was largely uneventful, but that she did enjoy the "buzz" she got from drinking several glasses of rum and coke while at a "sleep-over" at a friend's house.

A regular pattern of consuming alcohol began when Phyllis was 17, in her junior year of high school. By graduation, she reported that she would drink two to three times a month when not playing soccer and once a month or less when she was in season. When asked about her expectation of the role drinking would play when she entered college she quipped, "A big part...that's what college students do."

Upon entering college, her soccer team was informed of the school's policy about alcohol and she signed a team pledge to not drink while in season; she essentially followed her high school pattern of drinking, however, through the fall season of her freshman year. During the spring semester of her first-year, Phyllis began to drink with greater regularity. She reported that she would drink between 1 and 2 "40's" during an evening out—a "40" being a 40-oz can of beer or malt liquor or approximately 3.5 to 7 12-oz servings. She reported that this quantity of alcohol would leave her with a distinct "buzz" or "drunk" if she had two 40's, but conscious and able to recall her evening out the next day.

In high school, Phyllis had been arrested once for under age drinking and had to serve 20 hours of community service and complete a 16-hour alcohol education program. She reported that the community service was actually enjoyable, but the alcohol education program was, "a joke." She continued to use alcohol throughout the time when serving the community service and attending the alcohol classes, although she did admit to being more discrete as to when and where and with whom she would drink.

By the spring soccer season, Phyllis was drinking two and occasionally three times a week and having four to six pints of beer on each occasion when she drank. Her first semester grades were average, resulting in a grade point average (GPA) of 2.47. This raised no concerns for either her coach or her parents given the demands on a first-year student athlete making the transition to college. At the end of the spring semester, however, Phyllis' GPA had dropped to a 2.11 as she had withdrawn from one of her five courses and earned "D" grades in two others. Although she signed the team pledge to abstain from drinking during the spring season, Phyllis continued to drink at least weekly through the spring season, but never before a game or practice. When asked about this she suggested that there was, "nothing else to do" on campus and that with all her time practicing and trying to keep up with her studies, it was just, "easier to party with my friends" than to consider options and find non-drinking ways to socialize.

When asked what she considered to be the "good things" about drinking, she indicated that drinking was primarily, a way to relax and unwind following the stresses of being both a student athlete and academic student. She reported that the "buzz" she would get from drinking seemed to heighten the enjoyment of the time spent with friends. Interestingly, she suggested that when she was not drinking and her friends were, after an hour or two the party would become "boring" and she would feel as though she was "missing out" on the good time the others seemed to be having. All Phyllis' socializing involved drinking and often it was the drinking that was the focus of attention at the social gathering, e.g., the "pay-one-price-drink-all-night" keg party.

Phyllis was asked about the "less good things" associated with drinking. She was able to list, without hesitation, several consequences of drinking that health care professionals would consider to be negative consequences if not problems. Among the "less good things" listed were: Feeling lethargic the next day, missing class, which she admitted was the primary reason she had to drop the one course during her spring semester, and "getting into trouble" as she referred to being written up for a violation of the university alcohol policy.

When asked why she used alcohol the way she did her first-year of college, especially having had the experience in high school of being arrested for underage use, she gave what may be a classic quote from a first-year student, "I just wanted to do everything my parents said I couldn't do in college." For Phyllis, drinking had become her social life. It was, "what college students (did)." Although surveys of college students suggest that Phyllis' drinking was atypical—only about 20% of college students drink the way Phyllis drank—it was her perception that this is what *all* college students did because this is what *her peers* did.

We will revisit Phyllis at the end of the monograph.

Alcohol & the First-Year Student¹

I knew alcohol and parties were a big part of college, and I guess that's something that everyone looks for when coming...

20-year-old sophomore (female)

There are numerous reports indicating that college students drink alcohol when they first experience the independence of college, but few reports present a student's perspective on this phenomenon. This section of the monograph presents an insider's view of collegiate drinking and explores how it shapes a student's, like Phyllis', college experience.

Survey research is unnecessary to alert educators, parents, or prospective collegians that under-aged adolescents experiment with alcohol during high school. In fact, under-aged drinking is so common as to lead many to regard it as an adolescent rite of passage. Consequently, many high-school students are experienced drinkers with a familiarity with the effects of alcohol and an established—albeit naïve—sense of how alcohol affects their behavior. Coupled with the common adolescent belief of personal indestructibility, or what students call being “bullet-proof,” drinking alcoholic beverages has become well ensconced in the high school graduate's expectations of an active collegiate social life.

Although this section is concerned with the onset of high-risk collegiate drinking, what of the transition from high school to a post-secondary education? Do a graduating student's perceptions of the role of drinking in a typical collegiate experience affect the entering student's understanding of successful social intercourse in higher education today? For the first-year residential student, is the physical separation from parents significant with regards to the way alcohol is viewed or the role it is perceived to play in collegiate life? As Phyllis noted, is it a quest to, “Do everything my parents told me I couldn't do,” that drives an entering student's choices? Is deciding how much to drink, when to drink, and under what circumstances is drinking appropriate affected by this understanding? These questions are of intense interest to researchers and student affairs professionals alike and the issue of primacy in this monograph.

Drinking Expectations Upon Campus Arrival

A decision to attend college—and if so, which school—involves students with many and varied factors. The more impressive their high-school grades and class rank, Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, and financial resources, the more divergent the pool of potential colleges and universities from which the student can choose and expect serious consideration. Geographical preferences, academic specialties, and athletic opportunities are among the factors that will affect the student's decision when choosing a college. Yet students report that a final decision as to where to enroll is often influenced by such subjective criteria as the “sense of community” they experienced when visiting a campus, the physical appearance of the collegiate environment, or other subjective criteria like the “feelings” they received when interacting with students during a

¹ Alcohol & the First-Year Student is based on the previously published, *When They Drink: Alcohol and the First-Year Experience* by Robert J. Chapman & Alexandra Zaballero in the online monograph, *When They Drink: Practitioner Views & Lessons Learned On Preventing High-Risk Collegiate Drinking*, by Rowan University, http://www.rowan.edu/centers/cas/hec/documents/draftmanuscript_000.pdf

campus visit.

I know when I came up for weekends to look at the school, the big thing to do was ... just go party with whomever you were rooming with. ... I did the same thing last year. ... I had three or four kids stay over and because of being in a fraternity, I'd take them over to the house. ... This is where all the fun is, over here at our house. 19-year-old sophomore (male)

Frequently, students speak of the opportunity for socializing as being a significant factor in their final decision as to which school to attend...and they perceive drinking will be an important part of the collegiate social scene. A student's perception of an institution's community—and the opportunity to be included in that community—is an important factor in the decision-making process when choosing a college to attend.

The student's belief that his fraternity house was, "where the fun is," is exactly the issue. Not only do such experiences influence an applicant's decision about which school to attend, but also they reinforce the expectation that partying and the use of alcohol are integral parts of the experience when students arrive for their first semester on campus. Thus, the acculturation process and the understanding of the role alcohol will play actually begin before a potential student arrives on campus. Such interactions with current students may well introduce expectations about partying that confirm perceptions about drinking and the role it plays in locating *where all the fun is* on campus. In short, the meaning attributed to drinking as a social event, in and of itself, is reinforced.

Yet, not all students have such first hand experiences. Some suggest that their expectations of college in general and drinking specifically came from the popular culture. Pop culture appears to play a large role in the probability that entering students will view alcohol as both a frequent and focal element in their collegiate experiences:

People are just affected by the media, by the articles they read, by the [TV] specials on campuses and alcohol. ... Kids are seeing that and the parents are saying, 'That's terrible!' The kids are like, 'Yeah, I want to go to college!'
—21-year-old graduating senior recalling her first-year

Given American youth's proclivity for watching television, cable, and DVD's, often with a drinking focus, these comments are not surprising. What this student seems to be indicating in this statement is the impact the media can have on shaping the way students come to understand the confluence of college and drinking. The media's influence on student perceptions is the result of an individual student's interaction with the popular culture as well as others in his or her social group exposed to the same pop culture outlets. As students observe members of a peer group—an actual peer group or an MTV *Spring Break* special—demonstrate the connection between drinking and collegiate fun, so too do they learn to view the item or event in question according to this interaction: we know what we learn and we learn what we're taught. *Animal House* (1978) is excellent example of this interaction. Although students will readily acknowledge that they recognize the film as a farce and its representation of college life as exaggerated, they nonetheless consistently use it to label and articulate their expectations of collegiate drinking. Add to this the litany of films carrying on this tradition, e.g., *Old School* (2003) and *Beerfest* (2006) to name two more notable examples, and import of the media become all the more

obvious with regards to affecting the meaning students ascribe to alcohol and drinking as cultural symbols.

When asked about the source of this perception, the 21-year-old graduating woman quipped: “Movies. You see them in high school. When you're in high school [drinking] goes on too, and you figure when you get to college there's not going to be any parents there, and it's going to be like *Animal House*.”

The Harvard School of Public health’s now famous *College Alcohol Study* has consistently documented the belief that college students *like to drink*. These biennial evaluations of collegiate-drinking practices and the resulting scholarly articles and popular news stories clearly place drinking on the short list of valued pastimes for many collegians.

When interacting with students at a particular institution being considered for admission, students tend to confirm the meaning they have already attached to *collegiate life*. To the extent that their perceptions are confirmed, the student is likely to believe that “this *is* the school for me.” This proclivity towards confirmation bias not only confirms the student's pre-arrival expectation that this is the “right” school, but the student is now primed to arrive on campus in the fall as a first-year student with expectations tantamount to a self-fulfilling prophecy. In short, students arrive expecting alcohol and its consumption to play a significant role in their collegiate experience and this is what they set out, unconsciously, to ensure. This is similar to student comments reported earlier in this section. A 20-year-old junior was quite poignant in his recollections of high school drinking and his expectations of college:

In high school, you always had to wait ‘til somebody's parents went out. ... [When] you think of college, you just think of a house full of people with beer everywhere, and I definitely figured drinking would be on a lot bigger scale. I figured there'd be kegs all over the place.

And this from a student who also reported that he: “wanted to come [to college] to get a good education.” It is clear from his statements that this student assigned similar meaning to collegiate drinking, as did other students cited in this section. It is interesting to note, as an aside, that his description of a college party is remarkably similar to the toga party scene in *Animal House*. It is therefore not surprising to encounter a student account of his arrival on campus and the apparent role these expectations played in his progression through the early days on campus: “even before classes started, I was introduced to drinking. Before I even set foot into the dormitory, I was introduced to alcohol and partying.”

First-Year Student Drinking Experiences

Although students report alcohol as playing a significant role in collegiate life, juniors and seniors indicate that alcohol and the rituals associated with its consumption were more important for them as entering first-year students and to a lesser extent, returning sophomores. Note the focus of this graduating senior who spoke openly of her relationship with alcohol during her first-year and the importance it played in her establishing a sense of belonging:

Everyone would just be drinking together and it was like this pseudo-bond that went on and you just became instant friends because you were getting bombed together. ... In the early years of college, freshman-sophomore years, alcohol plays a very, very important

role in a college students' life.

Her recollection is typical of students when talking about their first year in college. However, speaking as a senior, she seemed to review those first-year recollections and recant as she became aware of their absurdity:

When I was a freshman and going to other schools to visit other chapters of my sorority it was like we had the common bond of the sorority, which was first and foremost. But then we'd all start drinking together and it was just like, "I love you," which is so ridiculous. You get this feeling like you love everybody!

This collegian seems to suggest that first-year students expect alcohol to play a role in initiating social contacts and negotiating a successful transition into collegiate life, and that this would not only be important at one's own school, but generalized to interactions at other schools as well. Thus, alcohol is viewed as a means to an end: social contact and drinking become the behaviors that ensure such contact as well as social success.

Entering first-year students frequently find themselves being one individual in a much larger academic class than they were used to in high school and they are acquainted with few if any of these new peers. Consequently, drinking is often perceived to provide the means to bolster this entering student's confidence and encourage the risk taking necessary to make new social contacts. If alcohol was a social lubricant in high school, it may be perceived as a social necessity in the early weeks of college. This is similar to the impression voiced in our case study student, Phyllis.

An eighteen-year-old first-year student majoring in Psychology spoke nervously of the pressure he felt from not knowing anyone on campus when he arrived. He spoke of the first-year student's belief that alcohol provides a vehicle by which one can venture out socially into the campus culture:

I think that drinking's a means to get friends. It sort of loosens them, so maybe they can be the person they really want to be and can't be without the effects.

This individual not only gives voice to what other students tend to think, but apparently empowers alcohol with the ability to garner friendship and allow students to be the person they want to be. This speaks to the elevation of alcohol for the entering student from a social lubricant to becoming the social vehicle.

As these students talk about a similar understanding of alcohol and its primacy, the process by which this meaning is forged is outlined. The students speak of what they observe or experience when they interact with a peer who happened to be drinking, and it is through these interactions that these students convey meaning on alcohol and drinking. As this meaning is realized, the student becomes more comfortable. The shared experience enables them to habituate to the collegiate experience.

But relying on alcohol to assuage the social anxiety of the early weeks of college does have its downside. A junior majoring in finance and international studies addresses this as he recounts his concerns about a friend in this statement:

My one friend, she's very shy, and she's a riot with our group of friends, but when we're out at parties, she's really quiet and reserved. And then, I'll notice that she'll drink more than everybody else, and then, by the end of the night, she's drunk, and everything's just coming out of her mouth. She'll walk up to anybody.

For first-year students, the transition from living at home and attending high school to moving into a residence hall and going to college presents a need to reassess approaches to many situations, most notably socializing, that were heretofore taken for granted.

Just as college affords students the opportunity to leave home and parental restrictions, so does it remove them from the familiar surroundings and numerous acquaintances that ensured a sense of belonging and social connection. Upon arriving on campus, students are immediately presented with the need to generate new social contacts to make up for a likely scattered cohort of high-school friends. However, such opportunity on so grand a scale can result in the opposite effect for some. This confluence of freedom, alcohol's expected role, and the desire to establish new social contacts leaves many first-year students distracted from the academic purpose of higher education as they tend to react impulsively to this independence rather than view it as the opportunity to assertively express themselves:

[Students are] on their own. They have the freedom to do whatever they want, come in whenever they want. There are parties going on all the time, especially the first couple weeks of school, and they're here to have a good time. They're not even really considering their studies.

—20-year old junior (male)

The confluence of an initial belief that drinking is synonymous with collegiate socializing, an anticipation of total independence once on campus, and finding oneself immersed in a peer community holding similar beliefs leads first-year students to look for a college experience that is rife with partying. Students speak of alcohol as if it delivers the expected experience and drinking as if it ensures social success. It is such meaning given to alcohol and drinking by first-year students that results in many of the behaviors which have come to symbolize collegiate drinking.

This first-year student expresses this perspective when musing about his pre-arrival expectations of alcohol on campus:

I knew that no matter how dry the campus was supposed to be or what the alcohol policy was, there were ways that alcohol could be brought in. It's always been a factor of campus life. Alcohol's always been present, and there [are] always ways to work yourself around the system.

These students do not seem to be questioning what is *real* about alcohol or what they *know* about drinking. Rather, it would appear that they take drinking for granted as a given part of the college experience. Then, it is not whether this *assumed* part of the collegiate experience will be a part of *their* first-year experience, but rather the extent to which it will become a part of their social repertoire and approach to coping with the rigors of collegiate life.

If students arrive on campus with generalized expectations of alcohol's role in college life, these expectations are confirmed as the student observes the drinking behaviors of their first- and second-year peers. In essence, the meaning generated by this interaction with the campus community and peers adds depth and perspective to a previously amorphous view of collegiate life and the role to be played by alcohol and its consumption. This process is tantamount to the student's social construction of reality.

Discussion

Listening to students as they reflect on their pre-admission and early first-year expectations of experiences with alcohol suggest several junctures (and one significant difference) with the literature on collegiate drinking. It is clear from what students say that they had been exposed to alcohol and drinking while in high school. Most acknowledged that they had been moderate drinkers. A few stated that they drank more. However, all indicated that they drank by the time they spoke with the author and had expected that alcohol would play a significant role in their collegiate experience as they anticipated the beginning of their undergraduate career.

It is suggested that these expectations stem from a perceived freedom and a vision of collegiate life as witnessed through media inculcation or pop culture exposure or media clichés. The confluence of the perceived independence of college living with the lessons of the popular culture has resulted in a generation of contemporary collegians who could be said to be, the *Grandchildren of Animal House*.

This is consistent with reports found in the literature of both higher education and alcohol studies. What is different, and comes only from insider accounts of pre-arrival expectations, is the effect of popular culture on contemporary student expectations regarding collegiate drinking. From Hollywood's *Animal House* to cable's *MTV Spring Break*, contemporary students are inundated with drinking messages. One thing seems clear when considering the pre-arrival expectations of college life by students...the extent to which such pop-culture icons have influenced their expectations.

Student expectations of drinking in the successful social life of a contemporary collegian are often set by the time they arrive on campus. Given the sources of information to which they attribute their specious views on collegiate drinking, it becomes clear why students often arrive on campus holding misperceptions about the social norms of college life.

The stress related to making the transition from home to college is real. However, while the relocation from home to campus as a transitional event in the psychosocial development of adolescents is stressful (See J. Taylor section), students who were interviewed perceived the relocation as more akin to the cross-cultural experience of *culture shock* than a developmental transition. This view of entering college and the initial experiences of the first year can have profound implication for the student's level of comfort during the early semesters of college. Though the new life they have away at school is full of freedom, they themselves state that their drinking is, at times, a conscious attempt to assuage the stress related to assimilating into the campus culture.

Contemporary collegians appear to have attached particular meaning to alcohol in general and to the consumption of alcohol specifically. Along with the belief that alcohol was an effective way to mitigate collegiate stress, it also appears to have been perceived as an indication of their

independence. Put another way, first-year students look at drinking as an overt attempt to be assertive and express their independence. This is a view of alcohol and drinking that does not surface in the student-development literature.

Students display varying levels of adjustment to collegiate life and their newfound freedom and their social and academic success is largely based on the extent to which their relationship with their parent(s) is secure. Such parent-child relationships suggest a better, more comfortable transition (Winter & Yaffe, 2000). On the other hand, insecure, attached students choose more reactive and suppressive forms of problem coping (Pennebaker, Colder & Sharpe; 1990). Consequently, parenting style may support certain predictions regarding student behavior during their inaugural year in college.

Students report their awareness of the absence of parental supervision and indicate that it is this absence that prompts some to intentionally *drink to get drunk*. Given higher education's current bent to reject the premise that the college or university should serve as surrogate parents, students may have realized that they are likely to experience collegiate life unfettered by adult supervision. Consequently, views on personal freedom, for students, include the primacy of alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior.

Conclusion

Collegians appear to be telling us that they understand the symbols that alcohol and drinking have become for students. Since these meanings are not present on the first day of classes, there must be some process by which this understanding is developed.

It would appear that as students arrive on campus, fresh from their high school experiences and rife with preconceived expectations of college and collegiate drinking, they are placed in a situation where they begin to interact with other students and their preconceived expectations. This interaction, occurring in the social milieu of the college campus, especially the resident hall, presents the student with a first-hand opportunity to experience the collegiate environment. This results in the social construction of the student's reality. In essence, the expectations of a collegiate life are tested as students compare and contrast them with their actual experiences. Consequently, the symbols of alcohol and drinking are given specific meaning as students interact with their peers in an environment absent of parental control where they act on their newfound freedom accordingly.

This may offer the opportunity to observe student behavior regarding alcohol and drinking, thereby providing a better understanding of collegiate drinking. Students establish the meaning of alcohol and drinking as the result of their social interactions with one another in high school, and now that they are in college, through their interactions with other collegians as well. All too often, these social interactions are exclusively with other students—and for first-year students this interaction may be almost exclusively with other *first- and second-year students*—and therefore their understanding of alcohol and drinking develops unfettered by any alternative views or use. Just as a child will develop language skills similar to those of the family in which it is raised, regardless of the dominant language spoken in the general community, so will the student establish meaning for alcohol and drinking based upon the interactions with the dominant peer group.

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Taking Another Look at Student Drinking

Although numerous surveys have suggested that most students are moderate in their consumption of alcohol, a recognizable minority of students nonetheless engages in high-risk and dangerous drinking. What is it about alcohol as an object or drinking as a behavior that results in this minority's insistence on using alcohol in such a provocative if not overtly dangerous manner? With a recognizable minority of contemporary collegians engaging in high-risk drinking, why do we not see *more* untoward incidents involving students and related to drinking? And why do college students continue to engage in these errant-drinking practices, especially given the fact that informing students of the correlation between drinking and problematic occurrences has been the historic focus of collegiate prevention efforts?

There is likely no solution to the problem of underage and high-risk or dangerous drinking. Like automobile accidents and hurricanes, the likelihood that this type of drinking will always be with us is all but a certainty. However, as with automobile accidents and hurricanes, there are steps that can be taken to reduce the likelihood that incidents will occur and if and when they do, reduce the harm associated with each occurrence. With the consumption of alcohol being a ubiquitous part of collegiate life since colonial times—Yale University operated *butteries* in the 18th century, which were the equivalent of contemporary convenience stores where beer, wine, and liquor could be purchased by students—the likelihood that any preventive efforts will dissuade most contemporary collegians from drinking until they turn 21 is unlikely. This said, however, the opportunity to affect the collegiate drinking culture in such a way as to reduce the prevalence of underage drinking and high-risk behavior by those who choose to drink has never been better.

In essence, finding a solution to the underage and high-risk drinking problems of contemporary collegians is not likely, regardless of steps taken, policies enacted, or dollars invested. There is, however, the distinct possibility that the institutions of higher education, independently and/or collectively, are positioned in such a way as to resolve the dilemma of how best to *act on* this problem rather than continuing to mount the historic *reaction* to it. To react to a problem leaves the question of who is in charge very much open to interpretation with odds being placed on the students. To act on a resolution to a stubborn and persistent problem places control in the hands of senior collegiate administrators. As one prevention specialist mused when discussing this topic with the author, “Who’s driving the bus?”

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested that the intent of his career in philosophy was to show, “the fly in the bottle the way out.” It was common practice in Wittgenstein’s day for people to trap the flies that invaded their homes by putting some honey in a bottle. When the fly detected the honey, it would crawl into the bottle and either become entrapped or fly aimlessly inside the bottle until dying due to exhaustion. Wittgenstein said that to show the fly the way out of the bottle was not to solve the problem but rather to “dissolve” it. Much like Wittgenstein’s reasoning in his approach to philosophy, this monograph is more concerned with “dissolving” problems than with attempting to solve them. Put another way, it is the intent of this tome to

provide senior administration with the opportunity to consider ways to act on resolutions to a dilemma as opposed to react to the problem of high-risk student drinking.

As intriguing as questions regarding the underpinnings of underage and high-risk student drinking may be, they have not been the focus of serious research regarding collegiate drinking. Rather, it has been the drinking itself, or more to the point, its consequences that have tended to capture our interest thanks to the attention paid this topic by the popular media. Media attention to collegiate drinking has produced two separate but important deterrents to understanding this cultural phenomenon—and more importantly proactively addressing it. First is the deterrent of misinforming the public, particularly future generations of collegians and their parents, as to the prevalence of such behavior. Second is sensationalizing the issue of collegiate drinking and shifting the focus from a serious consideration of the subject to a more wanton curiosity.

Essentially, what the general public knows about collegiate drinking results from the information provided along a continuum of entertainment-oriented media outlets. At one pole in this continuum the media sensationalize quantitative research concerning what investigators have coined as collegiate *binge drinking*—an imprecise but nonetheless sexy term that captures the interest of the very public the media have targeted as consumers—in the name of news. At the other pole, the viewer is titillated with prurient advertisements for *Girls Gone Wild* videos for sale and accounts of college *Spring Break* rituals aired as specials on cable or touted as investigational reports on TV magazines. Add to this the plot lines from popular films and television programming along with the way in which alcohol tends to be presented in advertising, and a clear but nonetheless skewed picture of the meaning contemporary collegians assign to alcohol and drinking clearly emerges.

It is the presence of this misinformation and skewed consideration of the qualitative questions surrounding the phenomenon of collegiate drinking that a Dickensian view of collegiate life begins to emerge. In many ways *it is the best of times* to be addressing these issues, as we now have at our disposal, evidence based means of preventing high-risk behaviors as well as effective means of intervention. On the other hand, however, it may well be *the worst of times*. It would appear that 21st-century college students are more committed to the use of alcohol in their pursuit of the collegiate experience than were their parents, *and* there is evidence to suggest that many now choose drinking with the expressed intent "to get drunk." This is a distinct shift in the motives for drinking articulated by the parents of contemporary collegians when they drank in college. It is this absence of a basic, unbiased understanding of student perspectives, and the meaning those perspectives hold for informing future prevention efforts, that appears to be holding back efforts to effectively change the campus culture of drinking.

For many student affairs professionals and health educators alike, this understanding seems related to the fact that students engaging in high-risk and dangerous drinking perceive themselves to be immune to the consequences of such behavior. They see themselves as being, as one student put it, *bullet proof*. When asked, students report that the alcohol-related tragedies that occur in higher education result primarily because of *bad luck*, or because the involved students were simply, to quote another student, "stupid." In short, students do not see themselves as ever being at risk of experiencing a similar situation...until it happens. If a deck on the back of an apartment house collapses under the weight of too many revelers dancing wildly while under the influence, it is the fault of the contractor that built the structure, not the judgment of the drinkers who pack onto it. If an intoxicated student falls from a balcony, it is the carelessness of that student, not the alcohol consumed that is blamed for the fall. And when students are referred

for an alcohol-related assessment following an drinking induced crisis, they often explain the consequence of a disciplinary violation by using similar reasoning, "I was in the wrong place at the wrong time," or "I was just stupid."

Such student perceptions are similar to the *just world hypothesis*, a phenomenon reported by social psychologist Melvin Lerner in the 1960's. Simply stated, this theory suggests that people need to believe that the world is a just and orderly place where individuals tend to get what they deserve—*good things happen to good people, bad things happen to bad*. If someone experiences an alcohol-related consequence, the tendency of the individual considering the occurrence is to think, "I would never have gone to his room, dressed like that. She brought it on herself," or "You'd never catch me doing that. He must be really stupid": The role that drinking played in impairing judgment never enters the consideration of the outcome. At a recent collegiate workshop, when the student audience was presented with the facts surrounding a well-documented case of sexual assault where the victim had been drinking, better than half the audience—most of whom were women—reported they would *not* have found the defendant guilty of assault. When asked their reasons, those voting for acquittal noted that the victim's intoxication and her foolish choices led to the incident.

When applied to college students, the *just world hypothesis* helps explain their perceived immunity to the consequences of their personal collegiate drinking. In short, they know drinking can result in untoward incidents, for others, but do not perceive that *their drinking* will be particularly high-risk because as, *good people*, logic dictates, "How can anything bad happen to me?" Consequently, it should come as no surprise that these same well-informed students might well experience tragic consequences when they drink excessively, for as we all know, bad things *do happen* to good people.

Coupled with the *just world hypotheses*, another phenomenon identified by social psychologists may help explain student reactions to observed alcohol-related consequences experienced by peers and why such observations—especially when presented with information about untoward incidents that relate to unknown others in an unbridled effort to prevent high-risk student behavior—fail to yield changes in personal drinking choices. The *fundamental attribution error* suggests a basic human tendency to overestimate the significance of personal characteristics as the causes of human behavior observed, e.g., poor impulse-control or clumsiness, while underestimating the situational origins. Put another way, when a student observes a peer who is arrested for fighting when intoxicated or injured as the result of an untoward incident precipitated by drinking, the consequence—the arrest or the injury—is perceived as being the result of something *about that person* rather than the situation that may have caused it. It is not the antecedent of the behavior that contributes to the consequence; it is the character of the individual performing the behavior that is perceived as its explanation. This phenomenon, in and of itself, likely sheds some light on why prevention strategies have historically been heavily invested in simply pointing out the risks associated with drinking in an effort to increase student awareness about the potential for harm associated with drinking, but these strategies do not translate into changes in student behavior. Unfortunately, because students view such incidents to be the result of a character flaw—or at best "bad luck"—of the drinker, they neglect to see this information about risks as having personal relevance.

Yet, another phenomenon comes from the research of social psychology and may help us to better understand the all-too-often alcohol-related tragedies that occur in higher education. *Groupthink*, as Irving Janis first called it, is an explanation of a particular type of group decision-

making. According to Janis' research, when a group is significantly influenced by its leadership and is isolated from mainstream thinking on a particular issue, poor decisions tend to result when the group is placed under stress. The hallmarks of such flawed decision making include a group's perception that it is invincible and that it has a moral responsibility to act in a particular fashion. There is also a tendency to view individuals outside the group as *others* and to justify this by using stereotypes of those others. When the group employs a buffer that insulates it from outside influence—a buffer that filters out alternative or contrary views from those expressed by the group and its leadership—individual members are pressured to go along with the decision of the majority. Drinking to intoxication, with an obvious elevation in the risk that negative consequences will occur, can further muddle this entire process of group decision making. Recall the scene in the 1978 Columbia movie, *Animal House*, that leads up to the infamous "road trip." In this scene, the brothers of Delta House talk Flounder into using his cousin's Lincoln Continental as the means to their ultimate end.

When *groupthink* takes place, the normal checks and balances employed in decision-making are no longer in force. This can be seen in quickly escalating and spontaneous student responses to, for example, a collegiate sporting event—what have been termed, *celebratory riots*—or the expression of perceived *student rights* express themselves.

Although we can speculate on how student-drinking behavior can be explained by various social psychological theories and phenomena, this only serves to invite further consideration of student drinking. In 2002, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) published *A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges*. In this report, the Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reviewed existing prevention strategies to address high-risk and dangerous collegiate drinking and, "placed [them] in descending tiers on the basis of the evidence available to support or refute them." This has become the gold standard for prevention efforts in higher education. Several promising approaches for addressing the issue of collegiate drinking appear on the first three of four identified descending tiers of effectiveness².

But even with the NIAAA's evaluation of what are and are not effective prevention strategies as a guide, it remains difficult to understand how contemporary collegians come to make the choices they do regarding alcohol and its use. A student's reality and with it, how alcohol is viewed as a substance and drinking as a behavior, likely affects the individual choices that student makes on any given occasion, especially when alcohol is available. This is of particular interest with regards to the decisions made by those students who choose not to drink, or if they do, who choose to do so moderately (four or less standard drinks³ per occasion). Such student perspectives provide a glimpse inside their perceived reality regarding alcohol and its consumption.

Understanding Student Behavior

Because of the consequences associated with high-risk student drinking, e.g., sexual assault and other forms of violence, unplanned or unprotected sexual activity, and vandalism to name but a few, it is only logical that administrators and student affairs professionals would focus on

² See http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/Reports/TaskForce/CallToAction_02.aspx for review of these tiers of effectiveness.

³ A standard drink equals 12-oz of domestic beer, 10-oz of malt beverage or imported beer, 5-oz of table wine, 1.5-oz of 80 proof spirits.

changing student drinking behavior in order to limit such occurrences. Historically, this is exactly what institutions of higher education have done—you prevent the untoward incidents by preventing the student drinking. Yet this approach to prevention, while logical and to some extent effective in reducing the occurrence of untoward incidents, has failed to stem the tide of collegiate drinking. The number of students that report that they drink, at least occasionally, remains stubbornly consistent. What if, however, there is more to changing the campus drinking culture than simply attempting to regulate or control student behavior?

It is not the intent of this monograph to challenge the wisdom of focusing on student drinking, quite the contrary. As a matter of record, several innovative and effective strategies to modify student-drinking behavior have resulted from this historic approach, most notably, *Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students (BASICS)*⁴, an evidence-based approach to addressing high-risk drinking behavior, and environmental management strategies⁵. Rather, the objective of this tome is to expand our understanding of this particular student behavior to better prevent its consequences. As in the resolution of the classic logic puzzle that challenges one to connect nine points on three parallel lines with exactly four connected straight lines, without lifting one's pencil off the paper, changing the campus culture regarding alcohol and drinking necessitates moving beyond the obvious.

High-risk student drinking is not an isolated occurrence, something students just do spontaneously. It is a specific behavior that occurs in a context. Before the first drink is consumed, there are certain antecedents to drinking that determine if and when and how the drink will be consumed. We know, for instance, that not all students drink and for those that do, they do not imbibe with each opportunity they have to do so. We also know that on those occasions when the decision to drink is made, most students are moderate in their consumption, only occasionally imbibing in such a way as to become intoxicated. When surveyed, 20% or less of collegians report consuming five or more drinks in a two-hour period during the two previous weeks. Although a sizeable minority of contemporary collegians, the point remains that most students do not routinely drink to intoxication. This said, it is intoxication that is most frequently associated with the negative consequences that are of issue when considering collegiate drinking. In short, the student drinking that results in the greatest negative consequence is episodic. So an unasked question remains: What are the antecedents to this high-risk type of student drinking and how do we address them in order to impact student drinking behavior? As mentioned in the introduction to this monograph, can we invite students to revisit the meaning they have ascribed to alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior?

Whether students choose to drink or not—be that to abstain from alcohol totally or to use alcohol, but only when certain circumstances have been met—to act on this decision does not *just happen*. Rather, the act of consuming or not consuming is based on a student's personal decision about drinking and is the result of a specific process by which the student evaluates the situation, assess the pros and cons of consuming in that situation, and then choosing to act accordingly. For example, the likelihood that a student would drink in class is not high, however, for the student who does use alcohol, the likelihood that he or she may choose to have a drink at an off-campus party is high. Why is it that most students would not even consider consuming

⁴ For a brief overview of BASICS visit <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/promising/programs/BPP19.html>

⁵ For an overview of environmental management visit <http://higheredcenter.org/framework/> ; for a more in depth review (PDF file) visit <http://tinyurl.com/eobu4>

alcohol during class, what might be called *situational abstinence*, when they may be just as likely to assume that alcohol will be a function of attending a party on Friday evening?

The act of drinking is a behavior that has been developed as the result of having passed through an experiential progression. Regardless of whether an individual student chooses to use alcohol or not, there was a time in that student's life when alcohol was essentially a non-issue. Irrespective of when the student was first introduced to the opportunity to drink, before that time the student was oblivious to alcohol as a substance about which he or she needed to make a choice. Consider the case of two college students sharing an apartment off-campus.

One student was raised in a high-crime area of a large urban center; the other comes from a farm situated in a county with more cows than people. Whether the college these students attend is in a city or in the country, each will likely have a nightly ritual before retiring that is the product of the environment in which they were raised—you know what you learn and you learn what you are taught. For the life-long resident of the high-crime area of an urban center, this ritual includes elaborate security precautions including checking windows and doors and perhaps insisting that a new deadbolt be installed on the front door for fear that a previous resident still has a key. For the other, doors are only locked to let your friends know you are not at home and elaborate security measures are relegated to surfing the Internet. It is not until the inappropriateness of the roommate's routine that is inconsistent with the environment where the apartment is located is pointed out that the issue of security is brought to the new resident's attention. Irrespective of where the college is located, both roommates are likely to look at the nightly ritual of the other as being at least odd. When the roommate coming from an area culturally similar to where the college is located informs the other resident in the apartment of the incongruity of his or her behavior, only then is that roommate's behavior called into focus and open to modification.

All behavior passes through three stages of development on its way to becoming ritualized. At first, the behavior is under the control of someone other than the person performing it. In our example, once the roommate from the different cultural background is aware of the incongruity, he or she will look to the other for guidance. Although the learning curve may be short, initially the nightly ritual in the apartment will be under the control of the student familiar with the environment in which the college is located. Eventually—and in our example, this will likely be a matter of days—the control of our culturally different roommate's behavior will be under his or her control. The student will need to recall what the new pattern of behavior is, but essentially this is done internally and without the intervention of the other. This second stage in the development of behavior can be seen as one of self-control. The third stage occurs when our student has become assimilated and so familiar with the nightly ritual that the behavior of securing the apartment for the night is now automatic.

The three stages of behavior development are: 1) control by others, 2) control by self, and 3) automatic control. We find this in countless examples in our own life from how we came to appreciate the significance of a changing traffic light to venturing out onto the Internet. The first two stages are conscious whereas the third stage is subconscious. The same stages of development affect a student's drinking behavior. For example, the student who has never before had anything to drink may choose to drink at the suggestion of a family member or a date or a circle of friends; the behavior of drinking is under the control of others, what some might refer to as *peer pressure*. This behavior then becomes somewhat typical or normal. The student reaches a point where certain situations or conditions necessitate a conscious decision regarding the benefits and costs associated with the decision to drink and the student acts accordingly. In this

situation, the drinking is under the control of the student, albeit influenced by the meaning the student has ascribed to alcohol as a substance and/or drinking as a behavior. Eventually, the situation becomes so routine, and the behavior so ritualized, that the decision to drink becomes subconscious; the behavior is now automatic. In the example above, the student does not even think about whether or not to drink in class. It is not until, like in our example with the roommates, one's automatic behaviors are called into question that they are returned to the level of consciousness and thereby placed under the individual's personal control again. This then is the unaddressed challenge faced by higher education: How do we engage students to move out of their automatic decisions about alcohol and drinking so that they once again are conscious of their choice and able to effectively weigh the *personal* benefits and costs as they make their decision? Current prevention strategies are essentially focused on preventing the drinking, not on the process by which students come to engage in it.

If you stop and think about it, the bulk of behaviors we engage in during a typical day are automatic behaviors. Those who ride mass transit have a routine that necessitate a minimum of conscious decision making. Behaviors associated with commuting are displayed automatically, perhaps as the commuter reads the paper or listens to music on a handheld audio device. It is not until something interrupts the routine that the commuter's need to attend to personal behavior is returned to a full level of consciousness. So the question regarding collegiate drinking would appear to be how do we ensure that students return the process of making decisions about alcohol and drinking to a state of consciousness? Without recognizing the significance of this question, the historic approach to preventing high-risk student drinking in higher education has attempted to alert students to the significance of their personal choices. With alcohol awareness weeks and other *consciousness raising* activities designed to inform students of the risks associated with underage or dangerous drinking, it was assumed that this information, in and of itself, would be sufficient to alert students to the dangers and risks associated with drinking so that they can make informed, proactive choices regarding alcohol. Unfortunately, this has not worked, at least as a stand-alone approach to preventing high-risk student drinking.

A Constructivist's View of Student Reality

It is a basic premise of a constructivist view of the world that no one can ever know another individual's reality from a position of objectivity. Consequently, it is impossible to objectively understand the reality of collegiate drinking—how alcohol and drinking are viewed as substance and behavior respectively—as perceived by all contemporary collegians. Interestingly, this is also true of students, i.e., neither can any individual student objectively understand the reality of collegiate drinking for all other students, drinkers and non-drinkers alike. Students can only construct their own interpretation of reality and the role alcohol and drinking will play in that reality *for them*. Collectively, these individually constructed realities regarding alcohol and drinking make up what is euphemistically called the "collegiate drinking culture."

Traditionally, social scientists in general and student affairs professionals specifically have attempted to objectively describe collegiate drinking in order to impact this campus drinking culture. However, if it is not possible to know a student's reality from an objective stance, then it is equally impossible to understand collegiate drinking as a phenomenon from an objective stance. It is for this reason, in part, that academics view collegiate drinking one way, student affairs professionals another, and parents and the general public from still another vantage point. Colloquially stated, we know what we learn and learn what we are taught, but this does not yield an objective view of the reality of collegiate drinking. Prevention strategies predicated on such intuited interpretations of collegiate drinking and its meaning for students are likely to arrive at

spurious results at best...because they propose to address the issue as it is perceived by those proffering the prevention strategy. Like the old joke about the inebriate who lost his keys one night—he is joined in the search under a street light by a Samaritan who asks, "Where *exactly* did you lose them?" "Over there," responds the intoxicated gentleman, pointing to the end of a dark alley. "Then why are you looking here," retorts the Samaritan? "'Cause the light's better here!" is the drunk's indignant response—speculating about college student reality is little more than, "looking where the light is better."

Prevention efforts historically have sought to make students aware of the risks they run and the problems associated with high-risk and dangerous drinking. Although we have effectively educated students about these realities—and contemporary students, in secondary schools as well as college and university, *are* more aware of the consequences that may follow from under age or high-risk and dangerous drinking—as has been suggested earlier, students *do not* see this as apropos to *their* individual situation. The historic approach to prevention, epitomized by the public service announcements (PSAs) sponsored by the *Partnership for a Drug-Free America* in the 1990s and more recently by the federal government's *Office of National Drug Control Policy* have been dubbed by many as *scare tactics*. Prevention messages that seek to simply point out the dangers associated with use have appealed to student rationality in order to achieve a better adjusted more pragmatic understanding of the reality of alcohol and other drug use. Ironically, alcohol use has been conspicuously under represented as a drug in many such prevention messages and it is only higher education that has effectively picked-up the gauntlet and aggressively looked at the issue of drinking. Yet, historically, via the same approach with alcohol awareness weeks, public displays of wrecked cars on the campus quad, and other such sensational approaches to prevention, prevention has been thought to result from increased awareness alone. In and of themselves, such approaches have been deemed as Tier IV or *ineffective* prevention strategies by the N.I.A.A.A. (see footnote 2 above).

The difficulty with these historic approaches to prevention is that if individual students do not see the personal potential for harm associated with high-risk and dangerous drinking, then the reality they construct regarding collegiate drinking is not likely to reflect this emotional appeal to their intellect. Although we may have created a better-informed and more intellectually aware population of collegiate drinkers, something has displaced this intellectual acuity, resulting in high-risk and dangerous drinking remaining a particularly resilient behavior in contemporary higher education. So there must be more to the story of understanding collegiate drinking than a lack of student awareness regarding its risks. There must be a different reality perceived by the students that choose to drink than the one realized by the collegiate officials overseeing their academic experience and the parents who worry about the safety and security of their sons and daughters. And for those students that choose to drink, their individual realities likely differentiate between those who do so moderately and those who *binge drink*.

When taking a constructivist view of collegiate drinking one does not so much seek to answer the question *why* students do what they do, but rather, better understand *how* they come to perceive it as they do. Put another way, trying to get students to be more rational and better adjusted to the reality of contemporary collegiate life and its risks may not be the most productive course of action for preventionists to pursue. Neither is an attempt to change their thinking or challenging their perceived reality likely to yield the desired effects, at least alone. Rather we are attempting to help students step back, see the big picture, and raise their own questions about the reality they have constructed for themselves. The irony is that this happens naturally, even if we do nothing, in what is reported in the literature to be the *maturing out*

phenomenon. As students experience collegiate life, they are forced by experience to call their preexisting views of reality into question. In essence, they deconstruct this reality as the result of the cause and effect relationships realized as they progress through successive terms in university. The problem is, however, that this process may take two or more of the four years a contemporary collegian is in school. In short, students reconstruct the way they view alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior as a result of the experiences they have over their first years in higher education addressing these issues personally and interacting with their peers as they do the same. If, however, we can better understand this process—in effect glean an insider's view of a student reality regarding collegiate drinking and how this changes with time—we will likely add another important arrow to the quiver of prevention.

Accessing these perspectives will afford student affairs professionals a greater understanding of how students—the drinkers and the abstainers—make the choices they do. Such insights, coupled with the N.I.A.A.A.'s assessment of effectiveness of prevention strategies, will likely further efforts to change the campus drinking culture.

How are these Individual Student Perspectives Accessed?

For better than a decade, I have been asking students about their views on alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior. Although these conversations and interviews have been with a particular population of contemporary college student—those attending a small, private, urban institution—I have nonetheless learned some interesting things with regards to these contemporary student perspectives and their consistency across three generations of traditionally aged undergraduates, suggesting a portent that higher education may wish to consider.

First-year students speak of arriving on campus with the belief that alcohol is *the key* to an active and successful collegiate social life, while third- and fourth-year students speak of it as an important adjunct to socializing, but far from *the* focus of their socializing. Consider this more detailed juxtaposition of these “entering” and “experienced”⁶ student views on alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior:

⁶ *Entering* students are first- and second-year students; *experienced* students are third- and fourth-year students.

Figure I

Entering Students

Tend to view alcohol as:

- 1) Entry to and enhance of college social life
- 2) A prerequisite for having a good time and ensuring “fun” in college
- 3) A common denominator among *all* students on different campuses
- 4) Necessary and sufficient for collegiate socializing
- 5) A reward/relaxant/problem solver; necessary social lubricant

Tend to view drinking as:

- 1) “Partying”
- 2) What all college students do
- 3) Consuming alcohol until intoxicated
- 4) *The* means to socializing
- 5) A major collegiate recreational activity
- 6) A sign of independence and assertion of personal freedom

Experienced Students

Tend to view alcohol as:

- 1) Enhancement of collegiate social life
- 2) A way to release inhibitions and permit having “fun”
- 3) A common denominator between *many* students on different campuses
- 4) Frequently necessary, but not sufficient for collegiate socializing
- 5) A celebratory or gregarious activity; enjoyable social lubricant

Tend to view drinking as:

- 1) Part of socializing
- 2) What many college students do
- 3) Consuming alcohol, occasionally to intoxication
- 4) An adjunct of collegiate socializing
- 5) A desired, but not required collegiate recreational activity
- 6) Characteristic of adult social life

As can be discerned in this comparison of views between *entering* students and their more *experienced* contemporaries, significant differences exist in their perspectives. Junior and senior students consistently reported growing *bored* with the, “\$5-and-all-you-can-drink” keg party; and while many first-year students continue to say the opposite, these third- and fourth-year *students*, who report dissatisfaction with *keggers*, were the entering students just a few short years before. What happened to transform the attitudes, values, and beliefs of these collegians regarding alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior? What was the process by which this transformation took place? And what implications might this process have for those who focus on preventing high-risk and dangerous drinking by contemporary collegians? Something enabled these students to recognize the negative correlation that existed between such drinking and other important aspects of their lives, for example, academic performance, social prowess, and landing job interviews in their later collegiate years. And although it is tempting to suggest that this is just part of the maturational process, the *maturing out* referenced in the literature, the process is nonetheless important to explore in order to hasten the process and inoculate collegians against potential untoward alcohol-related experiences.

This variance—some would call it the result of *mellowing*—is certainly the result of the cause-and-effect relationship that exists between the individual choices made by entering students (as they act on the pre-arrival attitudes, values, and beliefs formed in high school) and the resulting consequence (experiences realized resulting from those perceptions). What is not clear is if this phenomenon is the exclusive result of such experiential learning or is simply part of the normal developmental process that affects all individuals as they pass from 18 to 22 years of age, that is, move from late adolescence to early adulthood. In either case, during the course of their undergraduate experience, students report rather dramatic changes in their personal perspectives regarding alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior, especially during the first four semesters in university.

Symbolic Interactionism

One explanation of how this shift in perspective results in such a marked shift in perspectives may come from the way meaning is attributed to one’s actions and to the actions of others. *Symbolic interactionism* is a sociological theory that suggests human interaction is organized around everyday events and proceedings that serve as symbols to which humans then orient themselves.

Grounded in the qualitative research principles, symbolic interactionism represents a world view that embraces the belief that we understand our experience only after having interpreted it through a very subjective process. Symbolic interactionists believe that meaning is given to objects, people, situations, and events, as these do not inherently possess such in and of themselves. People interpret and define their experience and this is both intentional and tends to shape their subsequent decisions, choices, and actions. In effect, the interpretation of experience “A” results in understanding and meaning related to “A,” which in turn can then affect the individual’s interpretation of experience “B.” For example, if a student in high school interprets the experience of drinking and becoming intoxicated, event “A,” as a positive and meaningful rite of passage, then the expectation of “B,” drinking in college, will be affected.

Traced to the early work of George Herbert Mead and others, symbolic interaction as a research paradigm is frequently associated with Herbert Blumer. Blumer postulates 3 basic premises on which symbolic interactionism is based: “1) Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them, 2) the meaning of things arises out of the social

interaction one has with one's fellows, and 3) the meanings of things are handed in and modified through an interpretative process used by persons dealing with the things he encounters."⁷ He suggests that "(t)he meaning of a thing is but the expression of the given psychological elements that are brought into play in connection with the perception of the thing; thus one seeks to explain the meaning of a thing by isolating the particular psychological elements that produce the meaning."⁸ Put another way, it is not alcohol as a substance or drinking as a behavior that have meaning in and of themselves but rather how that meaning is conferred upon them.

As an approach to understanding contemporary collegians, symbolic interactionism proffers the perspective that it is the importance of a student's interpretation of events or experiences and the meaning that results that is the issue of primacy when attempting to understand the social phenomenon of collegiate drinking. Such a method of considering student behavior primarily concerns itself with understanding the culturally specific meaning placed by students on the events and objects in their lives in college. It further suggests that the origins of student culture are to be found in the ongoing process of interaction between individual student and the symbols used to facilitate that interaction. There may be no better example of this phenomenon than the arena of collegiate drinking. Blumer sees the human being as continually in action; whether alone or in a group. On behalf of or representing some organization or group of individuals, we all continually have experiences. The commingling of groups of individuals, all interpreting their experiences in order to discern their meaning, socially interacting in order to determining the nature of the objects they encounter and experiences they have, determine the nature of human action. This resulting confluence is greater than the sum of the individual actions that may be taken by human beings. It is this result that makes symbolic interactionism such a compelling "window of opportunity" through which to view and attempt to understand collegiate drinking.

The collegiate experience represents just such a nexus of students engaged in the individual pursuit of a common experience. Their drinking, which has been such a historical constant in the collegiate experience, is rich in symbolic meaning and rife with interpretation. Individual perspectives can be understood in terms of how students come to define alcohol in general and drinking specifically. How meaning is conferred on alcohol, the impact of that meaning on student definitions of drinking, and how those definitions change over time are all questions that warrant closer investigation and with an awareness of symbolic interaction.

Such an approach to exploring collegiate drinking will not be without its critics. Those who hold that students are inherently rational, pragmatic, and predisposed to value individualism, as are all human beings, will take exception with such a post-modern view of collegiate drinking. The basic premise on which symbolic interactionism is based, namely, that the development of a unique and independent *individual*, including that individual's sense of personal rights, feelings, or identity, is predicated on the influence of a social group. This suggests that such an approach to viewing collegiate drinking, while it may not answer the question *why* students drink, may nonetheless shed light on how contemporary collegians think about drinking and more to the point, what happens to that thinking as they progress towards *maturing out*. If everything contemporary collegians know—language, values, customs—results from their interaction with peers, among others such as parents, in high school and then in university, how can understanding more about the process by which they ascribe meaning to personal experience not be of interest to the social scientist seeking to understand a campus drinking culture? It is this

⁷ Blumer (1969, p. 2).

⁸ (p. 4).

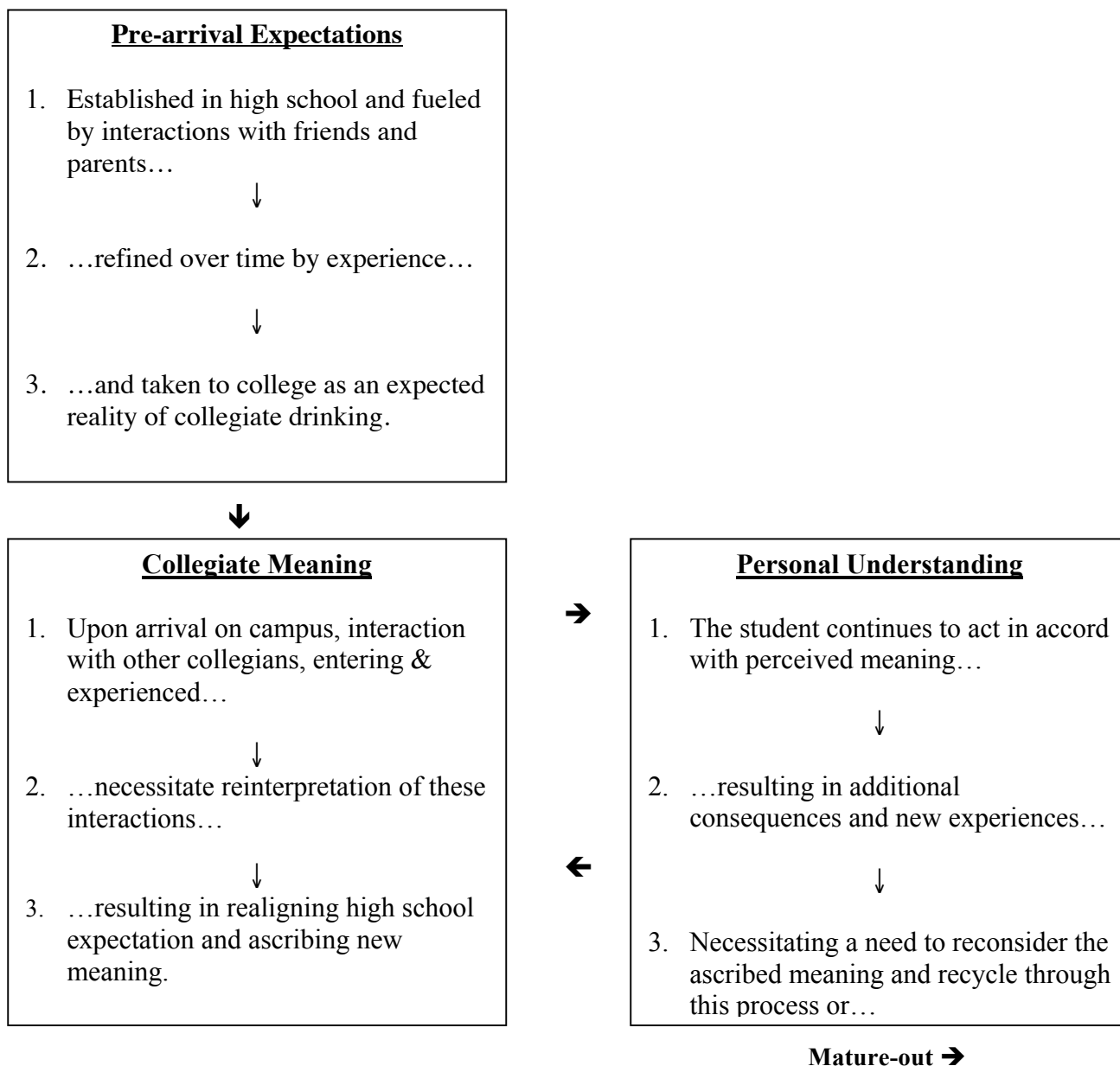
process that establishes the culturally specific values surrounding how alcohol is viewed as a substance and its consumption is perceived as behavior. In short, symbolic interactionism recognizes the primacy of social influence in determining personal values and the behaviors they drive. This understanding in turn acts as like a *Rosetta Stone* of sorts, enabling social scientists to better comprehend the subjective interpretation of complex social events as experienced by contemporary collegians. This, if nothing else, would seem to yield a rich yet reasoned interpretation of collegiate drinking in the 21st century.

In summary, we tend to assign meaning to our experiences through the interaction we have with others as we process those experiences. The personal consequences that follow individual choices based on these perspectives, for example, sleeping through an exam the morning following an evening's drinking or the regrets and embarrassing resulting from inebriated decisions, or the reactions of those who interact with the drinker—confrontation, avoidance, or exclusion—can affect the way alcohol is viewed as a substance and drinking is perceived as a behavior. Through this interaction with others, driven by perspectives established prior to arriving on campus, students ascribe new meaning to these *symbols*. How one comes to view and understand these responses will affect the resulting course of action taken by the observer, not to mention how the event is stored in memory and how the event is later recalled. Those who subscribe to this view of how meaning is attributed to actions recognize that we all engage in this practice and assign meaning to our own behavior as well as that of others by exactly the same process. This evolution of meaning is more than just a simple physical response to environmental stimuli. Put another way, the most interesting aspects of human behavior result from the meaning individuals assign to their own actions and to the actions of others. Just as language is comprised of auditory symbols that have meaning that can change through use and interaction over time, so do the events and proceedings involving alcohol in our lives come to have meaning...and so can this meaning change with time and experience.

Explaining the Variance in *Entering* and *Experienced* Student Perspectives

What follows is a simple heuristic that is intended to outline the *maturing-out phenomenon* by considering how meaning may be ascribed—and re-ascribed—to alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior. It should be read as a counter-clockwise progression from the *Pre-Arrival Expectations* of entering students through the process by which students ascribe meaning to alcohol and drinking. The student may cycle through the *Collegiate Meaning* and *Personal Understanding* phases of this progression repeated times. Whether this process would result in the maturing-out that students mentioned above would experience is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that it would appear that students view alcohol and drinking on the basis of the meaning they ascribe to their own actions and to those of others with whom they interact during their undergraduate experience.

Figure II
Collegian-Alcohol Interaction



These *pre-arrival* perceptions of what college is like and the role drinking will play in the entering student's collegiate experience have been the subject of great interest during the last decade with student tendencies to *misperceive* the social norms of the environment in which they exist becoming a focus of rather intense empirical study. Preliminary results suggest that students *over estimate* the frequency at which their peers drink as well as the amount that is consumed on each drinking occasion. If this propensity to misperceive social norms is true, it suggests that by confronting the *misperceptions* about alcohol and drinking, changes will occur in patterns of student drinking. As logical as this argument is, it has not been without its critics. However, in 2002, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism listed social norms marketing in its Tier 3 level of prevention strategy, (*Evidence of Logical and Theoretical Promise, But Require More Comprehensive Evaluation*), and in 2003, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration listed social norms marketing campaigns among one of the more promising practices in the prevention of high-risk and dangerous collegiate drinking.

Recently, research conducted by the Boston University School of Public Health suggested that such social norms campaigns seem to reduce the rates of high-risk and dangerous drinking in environments where this practice is stable, and they seem to inoculate students at those campuses where high-risk drinking practices are on the increase. This and other research on social norms marketing is now finding its way into the scientific literature, suggesting that this approach to preventing high-risk and dangerous collegiate drink may soon find itself listed as a NIAAA Tier 1 program of effectiveness, *Evidence of Effectiveness Among College Students*.

Implications of the Meaning Students Ascribe to Alcohol & Drinking

That alcohol and drinking are significant factors in American culture is not news. One need look no further than the proliferation of advertising related to the sale of beer, wine, and spirits, not to mention those places that purvey these beverages, to recognize that drinking is an important thread woven throughout the fabric of contemporary American society. With the advent of the Harvard School of Public Health's *College Alcohol Study* and its annual administration and plethora of scholarly reports on its collected data, it comes as no surprise that this is true of the collegiate sub-culture as well. But what are some examples of how this prominence for students in contemporary institutions of higher education manifests itself in the day-to-day activities of collegians in the 21st-century?

Regarding First-year Students and Culture Shock

A familiarity with the literature on collegiate drinking coupled with 18+ years working with contemporary collegians around these issues—not to mention the personal reality of college drinking as constructed in the late 1960s—prepared the author to hear students talk about their difficulties in making the transition from high school to college. What was unexpected in these conversations was the perception of this transition, for the individuals making it, as being akin to culture shock for many of the students interviewed. These students spoke of changes they had to make in personal attitudes, values, and beliefs in order to resolve the dissonance caused by being away from home and all to which they had become so accustomed. Included in this transition was the need to question their perspectives on objects and events previously accepted as absolute and providing a heretofore-unquestioned view of reality. Consequently, students were challenged to radically rethink a number of areas of their lives, not the least of which was the meaning they placed on alcohol as a substance and drinking as an event.

To expand on this observation, it would appear that student drinking, in and of itself, has come to constitute a distinct culture, complete with identified attitudes, values, and beliefs. To this end, the question of preventing high-risk and dangerous drinking in contemporary institutions of higher education may be as much about helping students acculturate in a new collegiate environment as it is infusing protective factors that reduce the likelihood students harming themselves or others as they move towards maturing out during the earlier years of this experience.

Attempting to comprehend the perspectives of contemporary students and, as a result, better understand their use of alcohol in an attempt to negotiate the *culture shock* of transitioning from a known reality—and one perceived to be absolute—to the new and unexpected reality of contemporary collegiate life, may hold promise for preventionists attempting to affect the college drinking culture. Accessing the insider's perspective on this transition will permit a glimpse of the first-year student's transition to college through his and her eyes. In pursuing this objective, it may not be possible to view the entirety of undergraduate students as one unique sub-population in the dominant culture. It would appear that college students, as a group, are *not* the homogeneous data set that they have historically been thought to be. Students present themselves as separate and distinct members of a unique culture...entering students and experienced students, those who drink, those who abstain, etc. However, as different as each specific group of contemporary collegians may be, what does appear to be constant is how each comes to construct its own personal perspective on reality, particularly as regards alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior.

Regarding the Variance of Entering and Experienced Students

When listening to the comments of students one quickly becomes aware of the difference in the perspectives of returning students, especially those beginning for their third and fourth years, as regards alcohol and drinking. One does not have to listen to many of these conversations before realizing that contemporary college life, at least in the U.S., is nothing if not a bipartite society.

Entering and experienced students each have a separate and distinct view of alcohol as a substance and drinking as an activity. Consequently, each group ascribes a slightly different meaning to alcohol and its consumption. These differences are outlined in Figure 1 above. For entering students, this meaning is an a priori discernment. It is steeped in the experience of high school and reinforced, repeatedly, by the accounts of older friends already matriculated at university. In addition, the myriad references to collegiate drinking in the popular media make it virtually impossible to not formulate a perception of the role drinking will play in collegiate life. So rife are the news stories, themes in films and television, and personal accounts of family and friends who have already attended college, that drinking is nothing if not a collegiate rite of passage. The problem, however, is that the reality born of this perception is spurious at best if not overtly wrong.

The premise on which Social Norms marketing is based states that students tend to *over estimate* the frequency and quantity of drinking by college students and *under estimate* the number of students who are moderate if not abstinent regarding their personal consumption. These misperceptions of entering students can be traced back to the socially constructed reality of entering collegians as outlined above. To understand the changes in student perceptions regarding alcohol and drinking, consider the nexus of interacting with other, more veteran students regarding their experiences with alcohol, e.g., accounts of lessons already learned, with a first-hand knowledge of the *cause-and-effect* relationship between drinking and its

consequences, e.g., missed classes, poor grades, social embarrassment, and judicial sanctions. The dissonance that emerges between this reality and the one formed in high school serves to mitigate the misperceptions and result in the maturing out.

This process can be illustrated with the example of a commuter who finds a new route to work. Prior to the discovery, the commuter's route was determined by general information or outlined by an online mapping service. Initially, the commute was as anticipated, or roughly equivalent to the pre-arrival expectations of first-year. However, with time, the commuter is confronted with difficulties when traveling this route, perhaps persistent traffic, or long-term construction detours. Unaware of an alternative, the commuter continues to use the same route, but without pleasure and ever increasing dissatisfaction. Then, as the result of talking with other commuters traveling to the same destination, the traveler discovers that there is an alternate route, one which may be less stressful and more productive, i.e., shorter, more scenic, or whatever. This *new way* is then selected, and after a period of trial, becomes the preferred route. With hindsight, the commuter probably wonders why the former route was ever used, however, does not dismiss the original route as incorrect. Rather, she/he realizes that it was initiated, followed, and unchallenged for lack of an alternative. As that alternative appeared—the result of social interaction with peers—it was considered, attempted, and selected.

It is important to realize that simply because of the change in a student's behavior, which results as terms pass, the student does not 'forget' his or her earlier beliefs. The perspectives of returning students demonstrate this as they recall the beliefs held in high school or reflect on their choices related to alcohol made during their first terms in college. Neither does the student chastise her or himself because of these previous beliefs. Rather, the student has adapted to a collegiate environment, in part, as a result of this social interaction with peers. In this sense, *maturing out* is roughly equivalent to the student's acculturation.

Regarding the Pursuit of Twin Objectives

First-year students, as well as those returning who recall their first years, enter college with every expectation of doing well academically while pursuing a social life rife with expectation of drinking and *partying*. Whether this results from a *je ne sais quoi* or student's naiveté regarding high school success in juggling academics with socializing, it nonetheless appears that students enter college with little understanding of the difficulty that the simultaneous pursuit of the twin objectives of academic success and *having a good time* will represent. It is not until first-year students have the opportunity to directly observe their collegiate peers having difficulty—or experience this difficulty personally—that these twin objectives of academic success and the pursuit of a collegiate social life involving alcohol are called into question.

It should be noted that alcohol and drinking are not the only saboteurs of collegiate success for the entering student. Many students quickly recognize that poor time management skills and difficulty postponing immediate gratification for longer-term benefit can undermine the best-laid plans of contemporary collegians. This said, however, although drinking and *partying* are voracious consumers of time, it is the consequence of drinking that frequently creates the dissonance between desired goals and reality. Frequently, students find themselves ill prepared for class or unable to attend at all because of the after effects of their partying. Even when not intoxicated, students invest time in alcohol-related activities that is then not available for studying. This, coupled with the late hours and propensity to sleep through early morning classes, quickly alerts students to the difficulties inherent in their pursuit of these twin objectives. However, because of the stated awareness that this difficulty resulted as much from staying out

late as it did from over indulging in alcohol, students report that they are not so much interested in curtailing their drinking as they were in controlling their academic schedules.

This again is indicative of the meaning students attribute to the experiences they have in the creation of a personal reality regarding collegiate life and its personal demands. The issue, as seen by students during their earlier terms, is that until and unless one takes control of her/his personal schedule, the twin objectives of academic success and a robust social life will become increasingly difficult. The pre-arrival expectation that alcohol and drinking will be issues of primacy in a successful collegiate experience remains. Yet, although there may not yet be significant change with regards to how alcohol and drinking are perceived as a substance and behavior respectively, the vehicle for addressing the dissonance that exists between pre-arrival expectations and the reality of collegiate life is in motion. Students, through their interaction with peers, learn that steps can be taken to control for the difficulties realized in balancing an active social life with a targeted grade point average (G.P.A.). Personal experience of the *cause-and-effect* relationship between partying and grades coupled with advice proffered by more experienced students results in a shift in the student's reality; what once was real, namely, *someone else* set your academic agenda, is replaced by the importance of setting one's *own* academic agenda as a way to accommodate the new reality of college.

Regarding Pre-registration

Virtually all students will quickly mention the significance of the pre-registration period as the most available opportunity to correct the problems realized in their pursuit of the twin objectives of academic success and an active social life. The pre-registration period is frequently perceived as the opportunity to establish student academic and social schedules for the next semester. Students freely speak of their use of the campus *grape vine* in order to share information about particular course requirements, professorial demands, and attendance policies. Armed with this information and the times when required courses were offered, students are able to synchronize their academic and social calendars thereby leveling the playing field on which they pursue the dual objectives stated above.

This is obviously not the purpose for pre-registration intended by Registrars or academics at contemporary institutions of higher education. Nonetheless, this is the way that pre-registration is approached by many contemporary collegians. In essence, pre-registration is a premier opportunity for students, conveniently provided by the college for just this purpose, at least as it is viewed by students, to preclude students having to choose between academic and social success. Stated quite simply, the resulting schedules frequently permitted a return to the first-year expectation of achieving academic success while simultaneously pursuing an active social life.

This again is an example of how the perception of entering students, buoyed by the practices of students who have addressed these challenges before them, have resulted in a modified reality that is again perceived as all but absolute. In essence, what once was considered to be the reality of academic pursuits, namely that courses and their offerings are essentially chosen for students by administrators is now perceived as being the domain of the student, with the institution having conveniently created the opportunity to do this so as to establish one's social schedule for the coming term.

In short, the expected reality that high school habits will yield collegiate success in both academic and social arenas is quickly called into question as students recognize the independent

challenges presented by both pursuits. Mitigated by alcohol and drinking, these challenges are met, initially, by addressing the perceived source of the conflict, essentially, a personal schedule, influenced if not controlled by others, which does not accommodate the issues of primacy as determined by students. This new information, gleaned from personal experience and interaction with collegiate peers, is factored into the equation for collegiate success with the academic pre-registration period being perceived as the vehicle by which to level the playing field on which students perform.

But what of the pursuit of social success as perceived by the entering student, and how do successive terms in school with their additional opportunities for interactions with upperclassmen and continued learning gleaned from cause-and-effect experiences with alcohol affect a student's collegiate reality? What *other realities* exist for students regarding alcohol and drinking and how do these change with successive terms and additional interactions with peers?

Regarding the Significance of False Identification

To hear that college students obtain and use false identification while in college is neither odd nor a surprise. It is, however, interesting to learn the difference in how false identification is viewed by different groups of students and how these perceptions change through time and with interaction with peers. For the first- and second-year students, the *fake ID* symbolizes independence and is coveted more as proof of membership in an exclusive club, i.e., mature college student, than frequently used as a pass that permits the purchase of alcohol or entry to an establishment that serves alcohol. In short, the false identification was important to these students because of its stature as a *symbol of maturity* rather than as a passport permitting entry to a club or bar.

It is the 20-year-old junior who more frequently indicates that the false identification plays a significant role in realizing a successful social life. Because of 21-one year old friends who enjoy socializing in places with liquor licenses, the underage junior either must have false identification or choose between being left behind—or change the venue where her/his peer group intends to socialize. First- and many second-year students prefer to do their drinking in residence hall gatherings or the *pay-one-price-at-the-door-and-drink-all-night* keg party to going out to a tavern, neighborhood bar, or club. Consequently, the false identification is of less importance to the 18- or 19-year-old student than it is to a 20-year-old peer. The significance of this symbol changes as the experience of the collegian advances.

This is a particularly interesting aspect of the meaning college students place on alcohol and drinking. As students mature through successive terms in college, they report growing tired of the keg party as the preferred venue for socializing. They also report a shift from viewing drinking in and of itself as being the focal point of socializing, preferring to congregate in smaller groups where talking, dancing, or other non-drinking activities are the primary focus of entertainment. Although the availability of alcohol and the opportunity to drink remain of primary importance, the tandem issues of preferring a more intimate or less harried venue for socializing along with being of age motivates many third- and fourth-year students to pursue socializing in taverns or clubs. The 20-year-old student's desire to *hangout* with these peers motivates the underage student to obtain false proof of age. In essence, the location where the socializing takes place, the choice of this site, and approach to socializing itself—as well as the resulting necessity for the underage student to obtain fraudulent identification—are all testimony to the meaning of primacy conveyed upon alcohol by students.

The Significance of Understanding Symbolic Meaning

Assume for a moment that you have just been cutoff as you were preparing to exit the Interstate on your way to intended destination. From out of nowhere, a car passes you on the right at a high rate of speed. You are able to avoid the impending accident only by aborting your decision to exit at the last possible second. Your immediate physical reaction to this event is to spike the brakes and you skid to a halt on the shoulder of the interstate just past your exit. As you sit at the side of the road, emotionally dazed and clutching the wheel with both hands, heart racing and just becoming aware of the overwhelming sense of physical weakness in your legs as the result of the flood of adrenaline just injected into your system, you replay the event. While your physical response to the near mishap is probably similar to that of any motorist anywhere in the world who has had a like experience, chances are your emotional response to the event is not so universal.

As you look out the passenger-side window of your vehicle, you see the 'other car' pulled over on the side of the exit ramp and you are immediately flooded with questions: how do I respond to this situation? Do you run over and beat on the hood of the car with your fists? Do you call the police on your cellular phone? Do you go over and offer assistance, perhaps apologize for having been driving too slow? How you choose to respond to this situation is a product of how you have interpreted the facts associated with it. Was the person intoxicated? Was the person experiencing some sort of medical emergency? Is the person a reckless driver? Your assessment of the events that just transpired will be influenced by your interpretation of the facts presented to you and the meaning you attribute to them as you reconnoiter, and all of this is completed unconsciously with the behavior it sparks happening automatically. Like the jury in *12 Angry Men*, your immediate reaction to the facts may seem quite understandable, but is it accurate? If you approach the car, angry and assuming the driver is under the influence, when the driver rolls down the window and you are overcome by the smell of alcohol, your assumption is confirmed. But what if as you are about to act on your rage you look into the car and see a woman giving birth in the back seat? It is likely that this unexpected discovery shocks you out of an unconscious, automatic behavioral response, and your behavior is now under your conscious control.

A simple but nonetheless effective illustration of the significance that the meaning one ascribes to a situation or symbol can have on behavior can be demonstrated by this exercise. For students who are convinced that alcohol and drinking pose no real personal threat or likelihood of harm resulting from underage or high-risk drinking, ask this question: "Is two minutes a long time or a short time?" We both know that the correct answer is, "It depends." Yet, the overwhelming majority of students presented with this question will answer that two-minutes is a short time. Upon this declaration, immediately ask, "Okay. Hold your breath for two-minutes." This always elicits the same response, a nervous chuckle, but the point is made: When the meaning of a variable is changed, the outcome is different.

In an interesting collection of essays on the subject of constructivism, Kollock & O'Brien (1994) introduce the concept of shared meaning as being the basis of human behavior this way:

Symbolic interactionists are interested in the process of assigning meaning to actions and the responses that follow...How you perceive (an) incident will determine your subsequent course of action as well as how you store the event in your memory and recall it later...However, there is nothing inherent in the interpretation that we place on the event. Symbolic interactionists hold that the most interesting aspects of human behavior take place as a result of the meaning that we assign to our own actions and to the actions

of others rather than as a result of purely physical responses to environmental stimuli. (p. 51)

Recall the point made earlier in the monograph that all behavior passes through three distinct stages of development: 1) behavior is control by another, 2) behavior is control by oneself, and then ultimately, 3) behavior becomes automatic. Until and unless something or someone presents students with a reason to revisit the symbolic meaning that alcohol and drinking hold for contemporary collegians, the process of maturing out is likely to continue to be measured in semesters as opposed to months.

Although a student may never drink in class or drink and drive, that same student may be just as likely to automatically drink in a residence hall when hanging out with friends or consume in a high-risk fashion when at a large fraternity party. The conundrum faced by administrators and student affairs professions is not so much how to stop the behavior, but how to challenge a student's automatic reactions to alcohol and drinking. It is likely that collegiate drinking will always be with us. What is not a given is that as many of those who choose to drink will do so in a high-risk and dangerous way.

In essence, what is an equivalent question that can be put to students that could cause an immediate reevaluation of the meaning alcohol and drinking have for students? What can institutions of higher education do that will increase the likelihood of returning drinking-related behavior to the conscious self-control of the student? Again, as Sondra Anice Barnes as written, "It is so hard (to change) when I have to, and so easy when I want to." How do we move from considering the solution to the "collegiate drinking problem" as being the control of underage and high-risk drinking behavior to motivating students to consider the meaning they have given to alcohol and drinking so that they choose to change rather than feel coerced to do so?

Affecting Symbolic Meaning

Many view the old adage, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink," to be a truism. However, what if the admonishment is myopic in its view of change? Perhaps one cannot make horses drink, but "you can salt the oats." And when thirsty enough, the horse will choose to drink, of its own volition. I realize that an analogy about making subjects thirsty is probably not the best one to enlist in a dissertation on the subject of high-risk collegiate drinking, but the point remains: What if efforts to address high-risk student drinking were not only directed at changing high-risk student behavior? What if administrators and student affairs professionals alike were equally as concerned about the meaning students place on alcohol and drinking in order to affect these antecedents of high-risk student behavior?

Important progress has been made in motivating student change as regards high-risk drinking behavior. Strategies that combine cognitive-behavioral skills with norms clarification and motivational enhancement interventions—programs like *Brief Alcohol Screening and Interventions for College Students (BASICS)*—and environmental management strategies have been shown to make a difference in high-risk drinking. As much has been written about each of these approaches to addressing high-risk drinking, they will not be pursued in this monograph⁹. This said, however, these are strategies that target change in *student behavior* whereas this monograph is concerned with pursuing change in the antecedents of that behavior, namely, the meaning students ascribe to alcohol and drinking. There are interventions that may be

⁹ Links to additional information about *BASICS* and environmental management are included in the *Resources* section in the appendix of this monograph.

appropriate for administrators and student affairs professionals to consider with regards to motivating students to reconsider the meaning they have attributed to alcohol and drinking.

First, by way of introducing several strategies that institutions of higher education can employ to focus their attention on motivating students to change the meaning they attribute to alcohol and drinking, it is useful to understand the stages through which a student passes on the way to changing behavior. According to the work of James Prochaska, a psychologist at the University of Rhode Island who has pioneered efforts to better understand the processes by which people change their behavior, change is realized in five distinct stages:

1. **Precontemplation**—In this stage of readiness to change, the student has no intention of changing anything about her or his behavior. As a matter of fact, no problem is thought to exist and it is this *reality* that justifies an adamant resistance to efforts to mandate change. The only issues of concern for a student in a precontemplative stage of readiness to change her or his drinking behavior are those associated with *the other's* perception that the student's drinking is high-risk. Those encountering a student in this stage of readiness to change are likely to describe the student as being in a state of denial.
2. **Contemplation**—In this stage the student is still not prepared to do anything to alter personal behavior. One significant difference, however, differentiates the precontemplative student from his/her contemplative peer: The student has reached a point where the issue of risk has at least surfaced as a possibility. Although there is no plan to change in the immediate future for the student in this stage, there is awareness that risk *is* associated with the student's behavior.
3. **Preparation**—At this point, the student has become aware that personal behavior is risky and should be altered. Although not yet prepared to initiate the change, change is, nonetheless, recognized as inevitable.
4. **Action**—This is where the student *rolls up the sleeves and gets busy with changing*. At this stage, the student has come to realize that change is both necessary and needs to happen now.
5. **Maintenance**—At this point on the continuum of change, the student has already modified her/his behavior. Maintaining this change in behavior, or what some might refer to as relapse prevention, becomes the issue of primacy for the student.

For the purpose of this monograph, the first two stages of readiness to change will be the focus of attention. It is during these first two stages that the student most ardently upholds those views that foster a continuation of high-risk or dangerous behavior, the result of having yet to revisit its symbolic antecedents. It is in the precontemplative stage of readiness to change in particular that the student is acting automatically on the opportunity to drink based upon the symbolic meaning drinking has come represent. It is because drinking, as a behavior, has become automatic that it is not perceived as high-risk during the precontemplative stage of readiness to change. In essence, because a student has reached a point where the meaning of alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior have come to be viewed as complete and therefore accurate, to consider changing this behavior is incongruent with the student's perception of reality. It is only when ambivalence is introduced into the student's consideration of this behavior that the issue of change even begins to surface. It is this aspect of student drinking that has been the focus of this monograph. Having raised this issue of addressing the symbolic meaning of alcohol and drinking as the antecedents of students drinking behavior, how can ambivalence regarding this automatic behavior be facilitated so that students begin to reconsider its utility in the overall pursuit of their personal goals in college?

By recognizing that student behavior changes in stages and that there are different processes of change that are more effective as motivators of progression from one stage to the next, administrators and student affairs professionals are positioned to affect the all important antecedents of those high-risk student behavior of greatest concern. Once students have begun this process of reconsidering the meaning of these symbols of contemporary collegiate life, change not only becomes possible, it is inevitable, or what is referenced in the literature as *maturing out* behavior. It is when students come to recognize that high-risk drinking is associated with one or more of the negative realities they have experienced in college in a cause-and-effect relationship that they then choose to moderate their drinking. This is the point articulated in the Brown quote earlier, namely, when student realize that change is what they want, it becomes so easy to achieve. So, what are these processes of change that can be employed during the precontemplative and contemplative stages of readiness to change and how can higher education incorporate them into their underage and high-risk drinking prevention strategies?

There are essentially four types of intervention that work best in motivating students to progress from a precontemplative to a contemplative stage of readiness to change or a contemplative to a preparation stage:

1. **Consciousness raising**—Activities or interventions that provide information or feedback to increase awareness of a particular risk or problem and its triggers, consequences, and cures. As is outlined in Figure II above, *Collegian-Alcohol Interaction*, it is student experience that precipitates a student's calling the meaning ascribed to alcohol and drinking into question. It is this reconsideration of this meaning that begins the process of change. This will occur naturally and, has been mentioned earlier, this *is* the maturing out effect. In essence, how can consciousness-raising strategies be employed to hasten this process?
2. **Emotional arousal**—This may occur as a result of observing a vivid case history or personal testimony of someone who has solved a problem with which others can relate. Although role-playing is the traditional activity that is facilitated in counseling treatment to affect such an intervention, it must be orchestrated and this is neither feasible nor convenient when considering a large-scale intervention such as a campus prevention strategy. There are, however, a number of ways that administrators and student affairs professionals can increase the likelihood that less experienced or *novice* students can learn vicariously and in vivo from their upperclassmen peers.
3. **Self-reevaluation**—Envisioning one's self with and without the unhealthy habit. These strategies are a bit more challenging to orchestrate so as to appear serendipitous, but can be pursued in organize interactions with first-year students or as part of activities incorporated into transition programs that target high school juniors and seniors. Peer educators from college presenting in high schools, activities incorporated into *Opening Weekend* or orientation programs, or simple comments made by collegiate hearing officers when speaking with students following an initial violation of institutional policies can facilitate this intervention.
4. **Commitment**—Accepting one's personal responsibility for change and truly believing that one can make the change. Self-efficacy or the belief that one can effectively make the change necessary to bring about a desired relates to commitment and can be improved in a number of ways. For example, increasing opportunities for novice students to learn

about successful change realized by upperclassmen, e.g., upperclassmen presenting first-person testimonials to entering students during *Opening Weekend* activities.

Recommendations

Having made a case to broaden the scope of prevention as regards underage and high-risk collegiate drinking, how is this to be done? What strategies will yield access to the symbolic meaning students have placed on alcohol and drinking so that these antecedents to high-risk collegiate behavior can be addressed in an effort to hasten the maturing out process and return decision making about drinking to a conscious level for contemporary collegians?

The proposals that follow are presented for the reader's consideration. Each is presented independently of the others and the reader is invited to use any one or all in an effort to further efforts to change the campus drinking culture on his or her campus. Further, it may be that none of the following proposals will be feasible on the reader's campus. This may be because of cost, institutional policies, or other factors idiosyncratic to the reader's campus. However, even if no single strategy proffered here is deemed appropriate for consideration on the reader's campus, it is suggested that the concept of accessing student meaning associated with collegiate drinking will yield meaningful and innovative opportunities for the reader to affect change regarding underage and high-risk drinking.

This being said, several specific proposals follow that are included as possible was to act on the line of reasoning presented in this monograph. After each proposal is presented, a brief reflection on how the proposal relates to one or more of the four processes of change outlined above will be presented. This format will enable the reader to consider the viability of each strategy as a process of moving students through the precontemplative and contemplative stages of readiness to change.

High School to College Transition Programs

To suggest that high-risk collegiate drinking is a pandemic is not exactly news. For more than a decade social scientists have been nothing if not persistent in alerting us to the problem and its apparent resistance to change. Yet, if we drill deeper we learn of significant changes in the campus drinking culture during this period. With the design of intervention strategies for problematic or *indicated* collegiate drinkers, and prevention tactics for the remaining students, professional educators are making progress in affecting collegiate drinking. Having moderated their drinking, these collegians graduate, join the professional work force and cease to be included in the research of social scientists investigating collegiate drinking. Yet, when these changed drinkers graduate, who replaces them? The very students that social scientists tell us are among the highest-risk of all collegiate drinkers...entering first-year students.

To carry the metaphor of collegiate drinking as a pandemic a step further, an epidemiologist would therefore be interested in the sources of the pathogen or *patient zero*. Clearly, we are not looking at high-risk collegiate drinking as if it were an infectious disease in the classic medical sense of disease. Yet, tracing the source or sources of what many consider to be the number one health problem faced by contemporary collegians may benefit from employing basic public health principles when attempting to isolate and then address the factors supporting high-risk collegiate drinking.

Among the factors that make first-year students among the highest-risk collegiate drinkers are well-established patterns of high school drinking, the increased independence and sense of personal freedom realized during the last years of high school, and the misperceptions of college-bound students about collegiate drinking. In short, although being particularly vulnerable for high-risk drinking during their earlier semesters in college, first-year students will be affected by environmental management strategies, social norms campaigns, and what the literature refers to as the *maturing-out phenomenon* as they pass through the subsequent terms in their college career. However, because these changed drinkers are replaced by entering students who are frequently experienced drinkers themselves—drinkers who expect to imbibe more often because, “That is what college students do”—a classic *revolving door* is created as high-risk drinking students enter college to replace those students graduating with more moderate views and behaviors related to alcohol consumption. Therefore, knowing that higher education is this cyclical environment that turns over 20% - 25% of its population every year, logic suggests addressing the stubbornly resilient rates of high-risk collegiate drinking by targeting high-risk entering first-year students.

Historically this intervention with entering students has been the responsibility of *freshman orientation* programs and more recently, *opening weekend* celebrations. Unfortunately, established high school drinking behaviors coupled with misperceptions about collegiate drinking—exacerbated by a dearth of life skills necessary to negotiate the day-to-day demands of college living—results in first-year students being among the highest risk drinkers on campus.

To make an appreciable difference in the risks first-year students run, they need to be exposed to prevention programming and interventions strategies similar to those that have shown results in higher education, but while they are still in high school. Such interventions are needed years before high school students arrive on campus and should likely be increased when high school students begin their college quest in earnest.

Points to Ponder

If institutions of higher education begin to market to high school juniors following their completion of the P-SAT (preliminary scholastic aptitude test) then these same colleges & universities need to collaborate with high school educators to implement strategies to lessen high-risk drinking by their future students. Such an approach would necessitate a formal *transition to college* curriculum for high school students and their parents as well as establish a collaborative collegiate/high school coalition to address mutual concerns. Consider that:

- High school students, like their older collegiate counterparts, misperceive the realities of what most of their peers are doing. Likewise, the transitioning high school student needs to understand that not all students in college drink and that most of those who do drink do so moderately. In short, high schools students are as likely to misperceive the norms regarding their peers, as is any group.
- High school students experience a great deal of stress around the issue of the transition to college and in particular, during their first year on campus. Coupled with the increased freedom of college, the campus environment exacerbates existing patterns of alcohol and other drug use.
- High school students need life-skills training that will increase the likelihood of being more assertive in order to assume the responsibility for the consequences of one's own behavior while at the same time being more proactive when encountering a peer's high-risk behavior. Many students recognize risky behavior when they see it, but are silent if not encouraging encountering it.

- High schools student parents tend to be preoccupied with academic issues as the preeminent factors in predicting collegiate success. Parents need to be encouraged to remain active in their child's social lives and provided with resources to help them act on instead of react to high-risk and dangerous behaviors exhibited in high school.
- High school student personnel professionals need to be supported in their quest to engage students regarding a comprehensive preparation for collegiate life. Training in effective intervention techniques that have been shown to work well with high-risk and resistant students can increase the likelihood of affecting student transitions.

As John Kennedy once remarked, "The time to fix a leaky roof is while the sun is shining." It is when future collegians are in secondary school that we need to be assertively addressing the problems of high-risk and dangerous collegiate drinking. To do anything less is, at best, to try filling a bucket with a sizeable hole in the bottom—although impressive efforts are made to improve the delivery of water to the bucket, the end goal is never realized.

A Pilot Program

The La Salle University Transitions Consortium

If under aged drinking and high-risk consumption are issues of primacy for contemporary student affairs professionals and administrators in higher education, then understanding where these collegiate drinkers come from and what drives their fascination with alcohol should be of importance. All traditionally aged undergraduate students—17 to 22 year olds—come to college having completed an approved high school curriculum. Some are home schooled, most have graduated from public or private high schools but all have high school diplomas, still others have taken a one to several year hiatus between graduation and entering college. But the fact remains; all have experienced high school in one form or another. Yet with the possible exception of those high school graduates that work or enlist in the military before matriculating in college, it is the nexus of high school to collegiate life that is the point of origin for the attitudes, values, and beliefs that most students hold as they arrive on campus to begin the collegiate careers as, *freshmen*. It is this epicenter of collegiate drinking that is the focus of this essay.

Who Goes to College?

The New York University (NYU) *Child Study Center*¹⁰ reported in 2005 that 64% of 2003's graduating seniors attended post-secondary education: 66% of women & 61% of men, 84% of Asian-American, 65% of White, and 58% each of Latino/a and African-American graduates attended college. Yet as important as considering these demographics may be in better understanding who attends college, it is perhaps more telling to understand the mitigating factors that affect contemporary collegians as they transition from attending high school and living at home to entering college, often as residential students, especially at private, four-year institutions.

In the same NYU study referenced above, it was noted that post 1985 high school graduates are twice as likely to report feeling frequently overwhelmed and more likely to utilize on-campus counseling services than their pre-1985 predecessors. In this same period, surveys of collegiate drinking have consistently shown that alcohol use has increased to a point where 2 in 5 students report what is referred to as frequent high-risk consumption—4 or more drinks for women and 5 or more drinks for men in an outing—on a monthly basis. Disproportionately represented in

¹⁰ See <http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles/transitions.html> accessed 28 August 2005.

these collegiate drinkers are freshmen, those who have recently transitioned from high school and are attempting to acculturate to a radically different environment.

In 2004, the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board contracted with the Center for College Health and Safety to conduct a series of focus groups across the Commonwealth, the purpose of which was to gather the perspectives of high school and college educators on the issues affecting contemporary high school graduates making the transition to college. What the participants in these groups shared with the investigators was not so much a content that was surprising as it was dramatic in its consistency across the State when reported by more than 80 focus group participants.

The proposed pilot project enabled the consortium that La Salle University formed with ten identified Philadelphia area high schools to implement environmental strategies PLUS ecological strategies to reduce underage drinking in the secondary schools and subsequently in college. The reasoning behind the consortium's formation was three-fold. First, the member high schools were all major feeder schools that sent significant numbers of their graduates to La Salle each year. Next, it was known that a majority of the graduates from these high schools entered some institution of higher education each year, and whether they went to La Salle or not, they entered higher education and in doing so, took their high school drinking patterns with them. Last, additional high schools were invited to join the consortium once the program was underway and established.

The understanding was that the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board was interested in funding consortia that would use evidence-based approaches to changing high-risk drinking practices of college students. The most innovative aspect of the proposal was that it targeted "future" college students who were currently enrolled in high school. The proposed project was designed to target student affairs professionals in the ten inaugural schools and to provide them with information about successful strategies to reduce underage drinking and the most effective ways to implement those strategies on their individual campuses. In addition, the proposal included support for a pilot project where such innovations were implemented in several or all of the consortium schools and were subsequently evaluated in terms of their impact on student drinking patterns in college.

Program Objectives

- To involve high schools that referred students to La Salle University in the process of preventing high-risk alcohol and other substance abuse.
- To hasten the “maturing out” process of lower-risk decision-making by students that had been reported between first-year and graduating students.
- To inform, instruct and support high school student affairs professionals regarding the use of effective prevention strategies when addressing alcohol and other drug issues in their high schools.
- To begin the process of changing the collegiate drinking culture by inculcating future collegians with harm reduction strategies.

- To create an open and productive relationship between secondary and post-secondary educators to address their mutual concerns regarding high-risk student behaviors.
- To facilitate an easier, less stressful transition from high school to college for graduating high school seniors.
- To establish a collaborative relationship between secondary and post secondary educators.
- To correct the misperception of high school students regarding the prevalence of high-risk student behavior in college.

To understand which students are the high-risk drinkers and where they come from is an important piece in solving the collegiate *binge-drinking* puzzle. Being able to discern when students tend to drink—and identifying those factors that differentiate between low-risk and high-risk consumption when the decision to drink is made—will enable student affairs professionals to better identify which students are at greatest risk of harm. The missions of most institutions of higher education include support for students as they pursue the twin objectives of a contemporary collegiate experience, namely enjoying themselves as they strive for academic success. It is therefore incumbent upon the present-day college or university to better understand the epidemiological factors that may help answer the questions, “Why do some students persist in the high-risk use and dangerous drinking?” and, “Why are some students affected while the majority are not?”

Although it is all but certain that there is no one answer that will satisfy these questions, it is likely that a greater understanding of the issues inherent in tomorrow's collegiate drinking lie in the attitudes, values, and beliefs of today's students in secondary education. And if this is even a remote possibility, partnerships between higher education and secondary education would seem to be an appropriate focus for the attention of prevention specialists of the future.

How High School to College Transition Programs Relate to Processes of Change

Elements of each of the four suggested processes of change can be seen in this activity. Regardless of the type of transition program an institution of high education pursues with its feeder schools, all activities associated with such programs will afford juniors and seniors the opportunity to step back and see the larger picture of collegiate life. Whether a specific curriculum designed to employ social norms marketing strategies to counter student misperceptions about the role of drinking in college or by inviting peer educators from the sponsoring college in to present the realities of high-risk drinking and collegiate life, students will be more aware the realities of collegiate life.

Specifically:

- Regarding *consciousness raising*: Transitions curricula will focus student attention on the issues of drinking and open the questions of the costs associated with the perceived benefits of drinking. Likewise, interactive discussions about collegiate life in general and drinking specifically will afford students the opportunity to explore their own attitudes, values, and beliefs related to drinking rather than assimilate the prevailing views proffered by the popular media.
- Regarding *emotional arousal*: The involvement of peer educators from the institution or institutions of higher education that coordinate the transition consortium can present students with a real-life peak inside collegiate life. Such presentations, coupled with first-

person testimonials delivered by contemporary collegians that tell their own stories of alcohol-related hassles and difficulties, enable high school students to learn vicariously.

- Regarding *self-evaluation*: As with emotional arousal mentioned above, these presentation afford the opportunity for high school juniors and seniors to place themselves in the position of a real student sharing real information. It is much easier for a high school student to relate to a contemporary collegian than it is to relate to a professional, regardless of how dynamic the professional presenter may be.
- Regarding *commitment*: To see and learn about how change was realized increases the sense of self-efficacy a student will have as the result of participating in a transitions program. Most transitions curricula include lifeskills training that address topics like assertiveness, manufacturing excuses to *not* engage in high-risk behavior, study skills, etc.

Environmental Management as a Phenomenological Intervention

A recognized approach to addressing high-risk drinking behavior is environmental management¹¹.

Strategies associated with managing the campus environment are recognized as likely to make a difference in the prevalence of high-risk drinking behavior on campus. Unfortunately, those students intent on drinking choose to continue their high-risk behavior outside the boundaries of the managed environment on campus. Such problems are among the reason this monograph has been written and focuses on the meaning students convey upon the symbols of alcohol and collegiate drinking as antecedents of this high-risk behavior. This said there are aspects of environmental management that can be adapted to address the objective of affecting student views on alcohol and its use.

Alternate Sanction Programs

A basic premise of environmental management is the consistent enforcement of institutional policies. Although individual policies at individual institutions of higher education may vary with regards to their focus, all are capable of being consistent in their enforcement of those policies they choose to institute. It is this consistency that enables students to learn the cause and effect relationship between the choices they make and the consequences that follow. Put another way, the consistent enforcement of established policies permits students to recognize that there are consequences to all actions. Some consequences are beneficial, others as costly. Although colleges and universities may not be able to control behavior with public policy, they may be able to affect it.

There is an exception, however, to this basic tenet of environmental management. If the students governed by these consistently enforced policies perceive one or more of them to be arbitrary or capricious, that is, they are perceived to be an unfair restriction of a student's rights or they result in the student somehow being wronged, then a state of reactance is initiated. The student is motivated to either right the perceived wrong or "get around" the perceived injustice. This can clearly be seen in student reactions to typical alcohol-related policies that are consistently enforced, e.g., a policy that prohibits a student not of age from even being in the presence of alcohol regardless of whether the student is drinking or not. Reactance to such "perceived"

¹¹ To learn more about *environmental management* read <http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/media/Journal/140-DeJong&Langford.pdf>

injustice would lead to flagrant violations and/or passive aggressive reactions such as seeking out "keg parties" off campus.

Administrators and student affairs professionals, particularly those professionals involved in conducting preliminary hearings or adjudicating student violations, need to be cognizant of what social psychologists refer to as *reactance theory*. A student that has been "written-up" for a violation of an institutional policy that is perceived to be unfair or inappropriate may well learn from the experience, but the lesson learned will have more to do with avoiding being caught in the future than changing high-risk behavior in the present.

There is, however, a step that institutions can take to lessen the effect of reactance theory on adjudicated cases and at the same time invite students to revisit the meaning they have given to the symbols of alcohol, and collegiate drinking. Social psychologists have learned that the effects of reactance can be lessened if the individual encountering the perceived injustice can be offered a choice of outcomes that follow as the consequence of the "injustice." Just as a parent can lessen the bedtime tantrum of a young child made to take a bath before retiring by offering the child a choice between a bath and shower, so can administrators affect a student's reactance to being held accountable for a violation of institutional policy by being offered some choice in consequences.

An alternate sanction program is a relatively simple program that can be implemented with little or no cost and administered with little effort. If the sanction for a violation calls for deferred suspension from housing, probation, and a fine, the student is offered a choice between this set of sanctions and one that replaces the fine with the opportunity to participate in a brief motivational enhancement program. Although there are various types of *consciousness raising* programs that can be made available to the student as an alternative to the fine, those that work best are related to an evidenced-based approach referred to as *Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students*¹² or BASICS. BASICS programs are designed to enable students to take a step back from their routine drinking behavior and consider its costs or liabilities as well as its perceived benefits. Employing another evidence-based approach to behavior change, referred to as Motivational Interviewing, is an integral part of a BASICS-type intervention.

Of course, for such an approach to assuaging the effects of reactance theory to work, the fines associated with the violation need to be significant enough to motivate the student making the choice about which set of sanctions to select to opt for the psychoeducational alternative to the fine. Irrespective of this fact, however, the act of proffering a choice will minimize the effects of reactance theory: Students are held responsible for the consequences of their decisions to violate institutional policy, yet nonetheless have a say in which consequence will follow.

How this Strategy Relates to the Suggested Processes of Change

Of the four cited processes of change that are effective when intervening with students in a precontemplative or contemplative stage or readiness to change, this particular strategy most directly employs two, *consciousness raising* and *commitment*.

- Regarding *consciousness raising*: Any activity that presents a student with the opportunity to realize that things are not always the way they appear to be can be a useful intervention when dealing with high-risk drinking. Although the consistent enforcement of institutional policies will increase the likelihood that students will recognize the cause-

¹² For an overview of BASICS read <http://www.modelprograms.samhsa.gov/pdfs/FactSheets/BASICS.pdf>

and-effect link between their drinking and problems they must address, it is the likelihood that students will choose the psychoeducational alternative to a hefty fine that is most directly associated with consciousness raising when employing this strategy. The fact that the psychoeducational intervention is steeped in an evidence-based approach like BASICS only serves to increase the likelihood that students will take another look at the meaning they attribute to alcohol and its consumption, thereby hastening the maturing out processes referenced earlier in this monograph.

- Regarding *commitment*: The easier it is for students to see themselves as being successful in assuaging the ambivalence they experience regarding a particular behavior in which they regularly engage, the more likely they are to consider a change. An alternate sanctions program accomplishes this awareness in two distinct ways.
 1. The presentation of a choice in sanctions associated with the violation for which the student is being held accountable speaks to the institution's belief that the student is an adult and capable of making a responsible choice. True, the presentation of the choice was intended to assuage the effects of reactance theory, but students will be unaware of this, that is unless they have read this monograph;
 2. The psychoeducational intervention, especially if steeped in a BASICS-type approach to intervening, is designed to invite students to recognize their ability to affect their own behavior. Add to this the inclusion of life skills training in the alternative to a fine, and the student's sense of self-efficacy will be enhanced.

Student-to-Student Protective Factors

The meaning that students ascribe to alcohol and drinking results from their personal interactions with these symbols of contemporary collegiate life. In addition to this, however, is the student's interaction *with other students* as they interact with alcohol and drinking as symbols of *their collegiate life*. This interaction between peers "cannot not" happen. Knowing this, it is possible to create mechanisms, policies actually, whereby this peer interaction can further the effort to affect the meaning that is conveyed on alcohol and its consumption in college.

It is a fact of contemporary collegiate life that some students drink in a high-risk and dangerous fashion and when they do, untoward incidents tend to occur. As one student said to this author, "Bad things do happen to good people." All too frequently, however, student who do drink too much—either on purpose, for example when trying to do 21 shots on a 21st birthday, or by accident, for example, drinking too much "punch" with an unknown alcohol content too fast—are escorted back to their room to sleep it off. Seeking help for an excessively intoxicated friend is often not seen as a viable choice because of a fear of getting the friend in trouble with campus authorities—if not getting oneself in trouble—because of a violation of the institution's policies regarding alcohol. Although most intoxicated students that are covertly returned to their residence will recover with little more than a hangover or a missed class or two, too often the inebriate will aspirate her/his own vomit, lapse into a comma, or die of alcohol induced respiratory and/or cardiac arrest, i.e., *alcohol poisoning*. This fact is apparent every year, usually in the fall, when the popular media report such tragedies and their association with the ubiquitous *college drinking*.

Medical amnesty or what are sometimes referred to as *Good Samaritan* policies may present the opportunity for students encountering an excessively intoxicated friend or acquaintance to seek out a medical intervention as opposed to a clandestine reentry to the inebriate's residence. On the surface, such policies appear as little more than medical interventions designed to prevent untoward alcohol or other drug related incidents. Considered, however, from the vantage point of

symbolic meaning that is the hallmark of this monograph, such policies enable students to revisit the meaning of collegiate drinking and reevaluate the cost-benefit ratio of this approach to realizing collegiate social prowess.

The existence of a medical amnesty policy coupled with a deliberate program designed to advertise its existence and the institution's commitment to follow its tenets may contribute to a change in the meaning associated with drinking, for both the inebriate and those involved in implementing the policy. Such a plan may facilitate a student's awareness of the institution's greater concern for student wellbeing over exacting punishment for violations of institutional policy. A secondary benefit of such policies may also include transmuting high-risk drinking from a collegiate "red badge of courage" to a true "medical emergency," thereby accomplishing the goal of affecting symbolic meaning. This being said, there are pros and cons associated with such policies. What follows is a consideration of these vagaries of medical amnesty policies.

Medical Amnesty: Professional Enabling or Indicated Prevention?

As institutions of higher education successfully implement strategies consistent with an environmental approach to changing the campus drinking culture an issue of increasing concern to many in higher education is the propensity for some students to engage in drinking to excess and becoming intoxicated "off-campus." This phenomenon is not new and the problems created by students that become intoxicated in the community exacerbate traditional *town – gown* tensions. But the issue of students going off-campus to drink, in larger numbers and with more frequent drinking-related consequences, would seem to be correlated with, if not the result of, consistent campus attention to employing the strategies of environmental management. Like a crackdown by police in a high crime area does not so much end the crime as move it to another location, so it would seem that consistent use of environmental management strategies has provoked a shift in where some high-risk students go to drink. And if they have changed the venue of their drinking as a result of effective environmental management strategies, then responding to this student migration may be a next step in addressing high-risk collegiate drinking.

Currently, when students drink to a point of being excessively intoxicated, friends tend to assist them as they attempt to return to campus. The primary concern of these well-intentioned friends is to assist the inebriate, but to do so while all the time avoiding detection by the institution and its judicial representatives. In short, making sure the assisted inebriate is not *written-up* has primacy when friends try to help drunken friends get home. The inherent risk in this practice is that in attempting to avoid detection, these well-intentioned friends may inadvertently "smuggle" a dangerously intoxicated peer back into a residence hall or other sanctuary to "sleep it off." This occurs without the friends ever realizing that the student's blood alcohol level has yet to peak or that the drinker had consumed some other drug(s) in addition to the alcohol that may result in a fatal synergistic effect.

Such policies become all the more interesting when we consider how an institution of higher education might address the paradox of having succeeded in reducing high-risk and dangerous drinking *on* campus only to have inadvertently contributed to its increase *off* campus. Is it appropriate to place the well being of the student inebriate first by allowing "any" student to request help—either for her- or himself or a peer—without fear of judicial repercussions? And if so, can these so-called "medical amnesty" or "Good Samaritan" policies be created and implemented in such a way as to avoid the perception of *enabling* maladaptive student behavior

or favoring the rights of the student over those of residents living in the neighborhoods where students tend to party?

A person in trouble is a person in trouble, irrespective of how the trouble came to be. Just as the individual who, in a hurricane, remains in a home in spite of an evacuation order can expect to receive medical treatment without fear of arrest if injured in the storm, should not an intoxicated student who requests help because of drinking be afforded the same assistance? The contemporary college or university can increase the likelihood that "students in trouble" will turn to the institution for the aid and assistance that may preclude a fatal case of "alcohol poisoning." If students eschew the institution when experiencing medical emergencies because of a fear of the judicial repercussions associated with receiving such help, then assuaging that fear would seem to be an appropriate topic for consideration by the institution. The challenge for most administrators who will need to address this issue is to move beyond the moralistic view that *bad things happen to bad people*, i.e., that students would not find themselves in alcohol-related medical emergencies if they did not engage in illegal or high-risk behaviors in the first place. This is an argument that has great emotional merit but is grounded in rhetoric rather than logic.

For better than a decade, the college health and student affairs literature has been replete with articles about high-risk and dangerous student drinking as well as strategies intended to intervene with this problem. Yet, during this same period there has been a shift in how prevention is viewed. This shift has been from categorizing prevention efforts as *primary*, *secondary* or *tertiary* approaches to viewing prevention as targeting *universal*, *selective* and *indicated* populations. In essence, the shift has been from viewing prevention as primarily concerned with "what" is done to focusing on "whom" the prevention is targeting. The former consideration of prevention looked at the effort as being focused on the strategy—primary prevention was intended to keep individuals from starting, secondary was intended to intervene in high-risk behavior and tertiary prevention was treatment for the problem user. The current conceptualization is that prevention efforts look at populations like contemporary collegians, recognizing that in the general population (*universal*) there are those who have no problem, those at risk of developing a problem (*selective*) and those already manifesting symptoms of a problem (*indicated*). These subpopulations coexist in the general population being considered by the prevention professional. Consequently, contemporary prevention efforts are directed at identifying interventions appropriate for each specific *target population* in order to reduce the likelihood of harm, recognizing that there are numerous objectives and strategies that can be implemented concurrently. If students who go off-campus to drink and routinely become excessively intoxicated in the process are to be viewed through "lenses of prevention," then they could be considered an *indicated* population or one for which indications for a problem are already present.

As the role drinking plays in the social lives of our students is considered, many student affairs professionals are becoming increasingly concerned that it is not a question of "if" one of their students will die as the result of an alcohol overdose but "when" this unfortunate outcome will occur. During recent academic years, there have been a number of high-profile student deaths associated with excessive intoxication, alcohol poisoning if you will.

Because environmental management has been so successful in addressing the issue of high-risk drinking on campuses across the country some students, the committed drinkers, have chosen to pursue their high-risk approach to partying in even less supervised venues than they had previously. In effect, some of the high-risk drinkers have decided to shift their drinking from

residences controlled by institutions of higher education to off-campus venues where they feel safer, i.e., less likely of *getting into trouble*, if only because they are less supervised.

It is important to note that an institutional policy that encourages students in crisis, as the result of whatever reason, to call for assistance from the institution when the student is in trouble is NOT tantamount to condoning the student drinking or the movement of high-risk behavior off-campus. Rather, this would be a proactive response to the institution's awareness that its efforts to change the campus drinking culture have been working. In addition, such a policy could be argued as being consistent with the school's stated mission as an institution of higher education concerned about the well being of its students.

A secondary benefit of such a policy may well be that it enables an institution to more effectively address the issues of civility and citizenship with its students not to mention refocus student attention on the all too often quintessential symbols of contemporary collegiate social life. This issue has been receiving increased attention in higher education as a factor likely associated with student behavior, both in and out of the classroom. By widely publicizing the existence of a medical amnesty or *Good Samaritan* policy, students can be taught how to assume a truly supportive role as they come to the aid of their peers and significant others. In essence, instead of enabling the inappropriate behavior, increasing the likelihood that it will be confronted for what it is, a medical emergency, and suggests the drinking that preceded it was high-risk and dangerous.

As a footnote of sorts, such a policy is not likely to be viewed as superseding any existing University policies. For example, if a student were found to be excessively intoxicated in the residence halls, that student could be handled in exactly the same way similar students are handled currently. In other words, if a student is vomiting in a hallway and confronted by a Resident Assistant, the student cannot "ask for help" and be excused for the consequences of his or her decision to drink. On the contrary, this is a student the institution would want to be confronted and involved in the judicial system in order to motivate an educational if not therapeutic intervention that can assist in preventing the likelihood of future high-risk drinking.

A medical amnesty or "good Samaritan" policy would be designed for the student who has become concerned for the well being of another at an off-campus location and contacts the institution asking for assistance in having the student medically evaluated and, if necessary, transported to the hospital. Existing policies that involve parents should a student be hospitalized would still be in effect with the only difference from a current response being that the student who was taken to the hospital as the result of asking for help would not be "written-up" and adjudicated in the campus judicial system as the result of the intoxication. Again, these are students who may have otherwise gone undetected by the University.

In summary:

1. Because we have been so effective in our quest to change the campus drinking culture, some student have taken their high-risk drinking off-campus.
2. High-risk drinking off-campus increases the likelihood that alcohol poisoning will occur.
3. A policy that provides amnesty from prosecution for intoxicants and those assisting them may reduce the risk of an alcohol-related untoward incident occurring off-campus.
4. Such a policy will not supersede existing policy regarding students behavior on campus and is consistent with the University mission.

Arguments For *and* Against Medical Amnesty or “Good Samaritan” Policies

1. Does the policy cover any and all incidents, regardless of how frequently a particular student may invoke it? If it does, how does the institution prevent abuses of the policy?
 - a. In considering this concern, the institution will first need to wrestle with what its purposes are in establishing such a policy in the first place. If it is to reduce the likelihood that an untoward incident will occur, then “how often” the untoward incident is prevented become something of a moot point.
 - b. This is an argument raised by those on campus who take a rather moralistic view of student behavior, i.e., rules are rules.
2. Does such a policy create a conflict if an institution has a policy of *zero tolerance*, either imposed by the Board of Trustees or in place for another segment of the institution, e.g., a particular academic department or program?
 - a. This is a legitimate question/concern. If a conflict would be created, perhaps the logic supporting the establishment of a medical amnesty policy should be used to open the debate to considering the intent and result of existing *zero-tolerance* policies.
 - b. In having this discussion, it may be helpful to keep in mind that a medical amnesty policy is not a “get out of jail free card.” In other words, if someone has reported to clinical in the Nursing program when under the influence or the coach of a particular sports team sees a player intoxicated, asking for help will not preclude disciplinary actions of the coach or Department of Athletics and Recreation.
3. Such policies are tantamount to condoning if not underwriting high-risk and dangerous behavior.
 - a. This is a popular and plausible argument...on the surface. It is steeped in the same logic that is used to question the efficacy of *harm reduction* strategies, namely, that anything that does not mete out justice, i.e., the consequences associated with having displayed aberrant behavior, reinforces the behavior in question
 - b. The fallacy of this reasoning becomes a bit more apparent when considering other harm reduction steps that have been embraced by our contemporary society:
 - i. Seat belts and airbags in autos
 - ii. Filtered and low tar cigarettes
 - iii. Fire extinguishers
 - iv. Condoms
 - v. Anti-lock brakes
 - vi. Traffic lights
 - vii. No-skid treads on steps
 - viii. Iodized salt
 - ix. Flame retardant materials
 - x. Fluoridated water
4. To establish a policy of medical amnesty suggests that the institution is aware that a problem exists. This awareness constitutes a duty to act, which can result in liability for the institution if amnesty is argued as a *reaction to* or cover-up of that problem.
 - a. In the litigious society in which contemporary colleges and universities exist, regardless of what the institution does, it is likely to be sued. If students will drink to intoxication off-campus and if an untoward incident occurs as the result of that drinking, then neither a policy of adjudicating identified intoxicated students or a

- medical amnesty policy designed to increase the likelihood that students will involve the institution in the care of the at-risk student will likely preclude litigation
- b. It is also likely easier to stand on a policy designed to reduce student harm in cases of high-risk student behavior while at the same time making it easier for peers to get help for a student in distress than to defend a policy intended to simply punish students for their aberrant behavior.
5. The extension of medical amnesty to students engaged in high-risk behavior off-campus will be construed as the institution's bias in favor of student needs over the concerns of the community.
- a. This is an argument, the outcome of which, is more likely to be influenced by the community's willingness to listen to the institution rather than the logic of the policy proffered by the institution
 - b. By the time that an individual student's excessively intoxicated behavior becomes apparent to residents of the community in which the student is partying, the time has likely passed when the institution can placate the community. A policy, however, designed to intervene in a proactive way with such students and usher them to treatment or care—especially if coupled with other programming designed to foster moderation by students who choose to drink—is more likely to preclude future disturbances that enrage members of the community
6. Such a policy will remove Safety & Security's option to rely on the best judgment of its officers regarding how to address individual situations. Many security officers argue that they already address situations of excessive intoxication with attention to the medical needs of the student(s) involved, but situations arise during which they need the flexibility to take other action, e.g., call police, arrest, detain, etc.
- a. This is yet another valid argument. Medical amnesty does not mean that representatives of the institution that become involved with excessively intoxicated students cannot hold students responsible for the consequences of their decisions. It means that if a student in need of assistance called Safety & Security, the troubled student would be assisted in receiving the appropriate level of medical care...without judicial repercussions.
 - b. If the security office encountered an excessively intoxicated student vandalizing a car or engaging in a fight, then the officer would intervene in such a way as to confront the behavior. True, this may also include transport to the hospital for medical care, but the medical treatment does not preclude the fact that the student was involved in vandalism or violence, for which judicial sanctions would appropriately follow.

How this Strategy Relates to the Suggested Processes of Change

Medical amnesty is essentially an example of how public policy can be established in order to affect student behavior. It is, as was the case with the alternate sanction program mentioned above, overtly focused on student behavior. But as with an alternate sanctions program, there are additional and more subtle effects that such a strategy may have on collegiate drinking, an effect realized more in changes in the symbolic nature of collegiate drinking than in the over behavior of the collegians such policies are designed to affect. We all know what we have learned and learned what we were taught. Medical amnesty policies may present students with the opportunity to learn that excessive intoxication is not necessarily the low-risk, jocular antics

portrayed by Bluto Blutarski—John Balushi's character—in the 1978 *Columbia* film, *Animal House*.

Specifically, this strategy involves several processes of change:

- Regarding *consciousness raising*: Students have historically "assisted" their friends and peers when they have been excessively intoxicated by escorting them back to their rooms or otherwise sequestering them away from the scrutiny of Resident Assistants or other institutional authorities. Such behavior not only increased the likelihood that the inebriate might experience serious trauma or even death, it underscored the *us vs. them* meaning associated with excessive intoxication and the sport if not necessity of subjugating institutional policy related to alcohol and drinking. In short, the historic approach to addressing a friend's excessive intoxication exacerbated the symbolic meaning of collegiate drinking as "rite of passage," "assertion of adolescent independence," or simply, "having a good time." A medical amnesty policy may present an institution of higher education with the opportunity to challenge this perception of drinking by creating ambivalence in the eyes of those students involved in or associated with excessive drinking. Such policies may help students come to recognize that, "what causes a problem, is a problem...because it causes problems."
- Regarding *emotional arousal*: Medical amnesty presents students with a new set of lenses through which to view a peer's intoxication. Such policies may prompt students to see risk when a peer is incapacitated by drink rather than an experience to be bragged about the next evening. In essence, such policies may contribute in shifting the perception of trouble associated with drinking from the policies of the institution to the alcohol consumed by the friend.
- Regarding *self-evaluation*: Students are presented with an awareness of how they can personally make a difference in the health and wellbeing of a friend rather than contribute to a course of action that could jeopardize that friend's safety.

Additional Strategies for the Precontemplative or Contemplative Student

The previous three strategies presented in some detail how administrators and student affairs professionals may be able to affect student perspectives, thereby changing the antecedents to student high-risk drinking behavior. There are likely numerous other vehicles awaiting consideration by the creative practitioner who has considered the arguments in this monograph and grasped its potential to change the campus drinking culture.

What follow are several additional "possibilities" proffered as brief vignettes for the reader's consideration:

Working with "Future" Collegians: The Transition from High School to College

To suggest that collegiate drinking is a high-risk behavior of epidemic proportions is not exactly news. For more than a decade, social scientists have been persistent in alerting us to the problem of high-risk and dangerous collegiate drinking and its apparent resistance to change. Yet, if we drill deeper into the issue of student drinking, we learn of significant changes that have been realized in addressing such collegiate drinking. With the design of intervention strategies for problematic or *indicated* collegiate drinkers and prevention tactics for the remaining students, professional educators are affecting collegiate drinking. But as successful as innovative as new strategies of prevention and intervention may be, once students moderate their drinking, they graduate, join the professional work force and cease to be included in the research of social

scientists investigating collegiate drinking; and when these *changed drinkers* graduate, who replaces them? Their replacements are the very students that social scientists have told us for over a decade are among the highest-risk of all collegiate drinkers...freshmen.

Among the factors that make first-year students some of the highest-risk drinkers are well-established high school drinking, increased independence and a sense of personal freedom, and misperceptions about collegiate drinking. In short, experienced collegiate students that have been affected by environmental management strategies, social norms campaigns, and what the literature refers to as the *maturing-out phenomenon* are replaced by entering students who are frequently experienced drinkers that expect to imbibe more often because that is what they perceive all college students do. Therefore, knowing that higher education is a cyclical environment that turns over its population every 4 to 5 years, logic suggests addressing the stubbornly resilient rates of high-risk collegiate drinking by targeting entering first-year students.

Historically interventions with entering students have been the responsibility of *freshman orientation* programs and more recently, *opening weekend*. Unfortunately, established high school drinking behaviors coupled with misperceptions about collegiate drinking—and a dearth of life skills necessary to negotiate the day-to-day demands of college living in the 21st century—result in first-year students being among the highest risk drinkers on campus.

To appreciably affect the risks contemporary collegians encounter, they need to be exposed to prevention programming and interventions strategies in high school that are similar to those that have begun to show results in higher education. These interventions need to take place sooner than when students enter college, even before being accepted for admission. Such interventions are needed years before high school students arrive on campus and certainly no later than when they begin their college quest.

If institutions of higher education begin to market to high school juniors following their completion of the P-SAT (preliminary scholastic aptitude test) then higher education needs to collaborate with high school educators to implement strategies to lessen high-risk drinking upon arrival on campus. Such an approach would necessitate a formal *transition to college* curriculum for high school students and their parents as well as establish a collaborative collegiate/high school coalition to address mutual concerns. For example:

- High school students, like their older collegiate counterparts, misperceive the realities of what most of their peers are doing. Likewise, the transitioning high school student needs to understand that not all students in college drink and that most of those who do will do so moderately. In short, high schools students are as likely to misperceive the norms regarding their peers, as is any group.
- High school students need life skills training that will increase the likelihood of being more assertive in order to assume the responsibility for the consequences of one's own behavior while at the same time being more proactive when encountering a peer's high-risk behavior. Many students recognize risky behavior when they see it, but are silent if not encouraging encountering it.
- High schools students' parents tend to be preoccupied with academic issues as the preeminent factors in predicting collegiate success. Parents need to be encouraged to remain active in their child's social lives and provided with resources to help them act on instead of react to high-risk and dangerous behaviors exhibited in high school.
- High school student personnel professionals need to be supported in their quest to engage students regarding a comprehensive preparation for collegiate life. Training in effective

intervention techniques that have been shown to work well with high-risk and resistant students can increase the likelihood of affecting student transitions.

As John Kennedy once remarked when questioned about a decision to embark on a program of change that seemed unwarranted and potentially costly, “The time to fix the leak in the roof is while the sun is shining.” It is when future collegians are in secondary school that we need to be assertively addressing the problems of high-risk and dangerous collegiate drinking. To do anything less is, at best, to attempt to fill a bucket with a sizeable hole in the bottom—although impressive efforts are made to improve the delivery of water to the bucket, the fact remains: An unattended hole trumps an enhanced delivery system every time.

First-Year Experience Programs

First-Year Experience (FYE) programs, often offered for one or more academic credits and designed to engage entering first-year students in an extended orientation to collegiate life, are growing in popularity. Although prevention efforts that have been started in high school if not middle school are advisable as noted above, most students graduating high school as of this writing are not exposed to any meaningful program designed to address the issues of high-risk and dangerous drinking in college. In light of this, FYE programs, A.K.A., *Freshman Odyssey*, *Freshman Year Experience*, or *College 101* programs can be an effective preventive measure regarding high-risk and dangerous student behavior.

Because entering students frequently harbor misperceptions of what their peers are actually doing, e.g., how often and/or how much they drink, social norms marketing can be conducted in these FYE classes. One of many techniques that can be useful is call *In Vivo Social Norms*.

This use of social norms marketing is designed for small groups, between 12 and 25. It can be used as a psycho-educational activity as well as an icebreaker in a group discussion on drinking. The objective of this activity is to invite students who do not perceive their personal use of alcohol to be high-risk to increase their awareness that their behavior may be further outside the norm than they think.

This is a spontaneous, brief group survey technique, designed to bring personal misperceptions of the norms in a client peer group to light. To use this strategy, have survey sheets with no more than 4 to 6 simple questions ready to distribute in the group. Design the surveys to reflect the focus of the group, for example, “How many students in the class drank last week,” “For those who drank, how many drinks did they have,” and “How often did *you* drink last week/How many drinks did you have?” In typical social norms survey style, make sure that the questions you ask are simple, straight forward and that they present the opportunity to identify individual perceptions about what perceived norm for the group is as well as what the individual student has done. You can take an extra step if you choose and actually offer some ranges for each question. For example, for the question, “For those who drank, how many drinks did they have,” you could offer choices like “0,” “1,” “2 - 3,” “4 - 5,” “6 or more” or divide the categories in any way you believe will best present you with the opportunity to illustrate the point you wish to make in that particular group. If you know everyone in the group drinks several times every week and you would be happy to see a reduction to 1 or 2 times a week, then you may offer 2 simple categories, “3 or less” and “4 or more”: The point being, *you* set the bench marks.

Once the surveys have been completed, collect them. As you are doing this you can make a bit of small talk about what you are going to do next with the surveys, assuring students that their

survey results will be anonymous, etc. Then as you continue to talk with the group about what you are doing with this exercise, obviously shuffle the surveys in your hands. After the surveys have been mixed up thoroughly, go around the group and ask each student to take one. Assure them that they are likely to get someone else's survey, but if they get their own, *pretend* it is someone else's. Then ask questions of the group based on the survey each member of the group is holding. For example, if having used the graduated, "How often did members of this group drink last week?" version, ask, "Who has a low number?" "Who has a high number?" This establishes a range, which is probably going to be quite broad. Ask all those holding a survey where the person who completed it drank "0" times stand up... "1" time... "2." It is not uncommon that where the perceived norm is 4 or more times a week, half or more of the group may be standing when asking if they drank 2 or less times a week. Again, be creative with the specifics, but this use of a SN strategy opens the door to individual group members being confronted with the dissonance in their perceptions of the norms. If they believe "most" in the class drank and 40% of the class is standing when those having "0" drinks were invited to stand, this sends a powerful message about the inaccuracy of student perceptions.

Processing this exercise is based on allowing members of the group to actually see that their perceptions of the norm may be skewed. Again, the purpose of the exercise is to allow those individuals with no intention of changing their behavior rethink the meaning they attribute to drinking...something most students are doing and therefore *must* be done in order to fit in.

A variation on this approach can be to employ the "snowball survey" which is used in many social norms campaigns. In such approaches, students are instructed to take the surveys once completed and ball them up into paper "snowballs" and then toss them around the room for a minute or so. Then everyone is invited to pick-up a survey and this essentially satisfies the need to "shuffle" the surveys in the group (Christensen, 2005; Gitchell and Zelezny, 2005). This infuses the technique with a bit of fun and facilitates a more spontaneous and open reaction to the information being shared.

Integrated Residence Living

If students tend to pack their high school attitudes, values, and beliefs about alcohol and drinking along with their computer, CDs, and clothes as they prepare to leave for college, to house all these entering students with similar misperceptions together can perpetuate the high-risk antecedents to collegiate drinking behavior. If, however, an effort is made to integrate the entering student in residential housing so as to increase the chance that they will interact with more experienced students who have already recognized the negative consequences that are associated with high-risk drinking, then the maturing out phenomenon can be facilitated.

It should be noted that many schools employ a lottery system where points are assigned to current students based on seniority, grade point averages, etc. As the housing process begins each spring, it is conceivable that many entering students the next fall will be housed together because many of the more experienced students at the institution have chosen to live together in the more desirous locations. It is therefore not enough to simply avoid the intentional housing of first-year residential students in "freshman residence halls." The resident life program at an institution of higher education will need to outline a plan by which sufficient space can remain in most resident life facilities to accommodate a portion of the entering students requesting to live on campus.

Involving Experienced Students in the Orientation Of First-Year Students

A major argument presented in this monograph has been that the meaning contemporary collegians ascribe to alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior has contributed to the persistence of underage and high-risk or dangerous drinking as perennial collegiate problems. It is the process of changing this meaning that serves as the antecedents to high-risk student behavior that has heretofore been all but overlooked by prevention specialists and student affairs professionals.

If enticing students to reconsider the meaning for these symbols of contemporary collegiate life can help the maturing out process, who better to facilitate the process than upperclassmen who have already been through the process. What if institutions of higher education solicited those students who had already been through the maturing out process to *tell their stories* or otherwise share their experience with entering students? Change in behavior seems to follow an awareness that the meaning for important symbols of collegiate life have changed.

Summary

The suggestions proffered in this monograph are simply examples of strategies, tactics, or approaches that might be developed to help facilitate change in the meaning students ascribe to the antecedents of high-risk collegiate drinking behavior. The reader who embraces the argument that such change is an appropriate consideration in preventing underage and high-risk drinking will undoubtedly identify other means by which to pursue this change. More important than specific techniques is the realization that until and unless we can hasten the process of maturing out whereby students voluntarily choose to modify their own behavior because the pursuit of former objectives no longer serves their current personal interests, high-risk collegiate drinking will persist. As Sandra Anise Barnes was quoted earlier in the monograph: *It's so hard when I have to, and easy when I want to*. When the meaning students ascribe to alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior change, so too will their relationship with these symbols of contemporary collegiate life change. To focus on student behavior without focusing on its antecedents is to continue to pursue an adversarial relationship with students regarding the issues of underage and high-risk or dangerous drinking.

Revisiting the Case of Phyllis

As much as Phyllis' behavior may seem typical, or at least not surprising, the question remains as to how such a pattern could develop. It is an over simplification to suggest tolerance to alcohol and the presence of a drinking problem necessitated that she drink this way. Although possible, or at least a potential eventuality for Phyllis, it does not explain her apparent difficulty in acting on the "less good things" she readily acknowledges as being associated with drinking. What did the symbols of alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior mean to Phyllis and how did this meaning fuel her pursuit of this pattern of behavior even in the face of recognized consequences? More importantly perhaps may be our understanding of the role Phyllis' understanding of these symbols played and their meaning in the decisions she made regarding when and where and how to drink.

There are several aspects of Phyllis' drinking that suggest her interpretation of the symbols of alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior impact her decision to drink. First, the belief that drinking is what college students due is indicative of seeing drinking as first and foremost a social activity. Not only did Phyllis see drinking as socializing, on those occasions when she did not drink, she viewed the social event as somehow passing her by as her friends became

inebriated and she did not. In essence, it was not just the fact that college students drink that influenced Phyllis' decision to drink; it was her understanding that drinking was, in and of itself, the focus of the desired social activity. The view that drinking is both necessary *and sufficient* to ensure a successful collegiate social event is fairly typical of entering students. It is not until students enter the latter part of their second year of university if not their third year that their understanding of drinking changes. Although drinking remains an issue of primacy for more experienced students, it is not, in and of itself, sufficient to ensure social success. What changes for these an experienced student is the meaning attributed to drinking changes. As many students note when discussing their understanding of drinking in the latter years of a collegiate experience, the excitement of the "all-you-can-drink" keg party wanes as successive semesters pass. As one student told this author, "it all gets old after awhile, you know; the beers being spilled on you, guys hitting on you when they're drunk; the fights."

Although the likelihood is that Phyllis will experience this change in her view of drinking parties eventually, the time between when her understanding includes seeing such parties as collegiate socializing and seeing socializing as avoiding such events, albeit with friends who may drink, is a time when she is at risk of untoward incidents, academic underachievement, and possible attrition. To expose Phyllis to opportunities to call her understanding of high-risk drinking as desired socializing into question could hasten the maturing out process. For example, exposing her in high school to a program that targeted students in transition to college and/or enrolling her in a first-year experience seminars and placing her in a residence facility where she could interact freely with experienced students could hasten the process by which the symbolic antecedents of her high risk drinking surface to a conscious level. Once the risk associated with a belief that, "drinking is collegiate socializing" was made conscious and Phyllis was able to reevaluate its utility regarding her primary reason for being in college, to play intercollegiate soccer on a Division One team, the primacy of such behavior is more likely to be called into question.

Another apparent meaning that Phyllis attributes to drinking that fosters her high-risk behavior is the opportunity it apparently presents to assert her newfound independence. Her declaration that, "I just wanted to do everything my parents said I couldn't do in college," suggests that breaking away from the perceived interference of parents in her personal life is important. To present Phyllis with a choice between a psychoeducation program and a straight disciplinary sanction for her first alcohol violation could afford the opportunity to take a "step back" and see the "big picture." The obvious conflict between Phyllis' short-term goal of an active college social life and the longer-term goal of playing soccer on a Division 1 intercollegiate team could present the insight necessary to motivate change. Although her experience in high school with the 16-hour alcohol education program was perceived as "a joke," exposure to a program that utilized Motivational Interviewing techniques and suggested harm reduction strategies in two one-hour sessions would likely be an attractive alternative to a significant fine.

In short, Phyllis' case presents several opportunities where the unconscious meaning that she had attributed to the symbols of alcohol and drinking could be called into consciousness for reevaluation. Although no one opportunity in and of itself would likely result in an epiphany for Phyllis that would result in an immediate change in her high-risk behavior, the confluence of several of the options cited in this monograph may well result in hastening the process of maturing out for Phyllis.

Conclusion

In the past decade, the issue of collegiate drinking has become a regular feature in the popular media. For far longer, it has been the focus of student affairs professionals and researchers who have been interested in the phenomenon of *binge drinking*. Although the media have accepted the term “binge drinking,” along with its definition (the consumption of five or more drinks in one sitting by males, four or more by females) the more accurate term to refer to this type of student drinking is high-risk and dangerous. Whichever term is used, the frequent and significant consumption of alcohol by collegians presents an issue of significance to all interested in higher education and the welfare and success of collegians.

Students speak of drinking as an expected part of their collegiate experience, a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood. While most students that choose to drink do so moderately, there remains a sizable minority of students whose consumption represents a threat to their own academic, personal, and social welfare, as well as presenting what have come to be called “second-hand” effects of high-risk drinking. It is this aspect of contemporary collegiate life, this belief that drinking to excess is a prerequisite of the *campus culture* that has prompted those concerned about the abuse of alcohol in America’s colleges to pursue evidence-based strategies to address this problem.

To “change the campus drinking culture” has become something of a rallying cry for those involved in higher education. And for the first time, there are models for accomplishing this objective that hold promise as outlined in the NIAAA report on the effectiveness of prevention strategies. The programs that hold promise are not steeped in legislative responses or enacted by those long out of college. Neither are they programs that attempt to simply educate students about the risks and dangers of alcohol abuse with the expectation that information alone will lead contemporary collegians out of harms way. Rather, as outlined in the NIAAA report, contemporary prevention strategies are steeped in evidenced-based approaches. These tactics offer approaches designed to meet students in each of three specific collegiate subpopulations, each with its own idiosyncratic characteristics: the *universal* or general student population, the *selective* or at-risk student population and, the *indicated* or already-showing-signs-of-a-problem student population.

For prevention programs to become more successful in affecting the campus drinking culture, parents, educators, and legislators will need to recognize that this is not a task that will be accomplished *over night*. Yet, overnight change is what the public demands, especially when presented with of sensational media reports related to collegiate drinking. Changing any existing culture will necessitate a carefully calculated and intricately planned strategy involving all participants in that culture. Those responsible for executing a strategy designed to affect collegiate drinking are the staff, faculty, and students who comprise the on-campus culture itself as well as the parents, politicians, and media who observe it, frequently ‘misperceiving’ what is happening. It is such misperceptions that have resulted in off-campus demands that *zero-tolerance* legislation is enacted, despite the fact that most students are moderate, if not abstinent, in their drinking. In addition, it would appear that those from off-campus making these demands are the same group that believe, somewhat naively, that making students aware of the risks associated with excessive drinking will assuage the problems currently appearing on college and university campuses.

Many of these individuals do not recognize that change in a culture occurs and in stages. At one pole on the continuum of change are those campus observers who expect change to happen

immediately and pressure politicians to enact legislation that will mandate change. At the other are those members of the campus community—some faculty and parents as well as many students—who believe that there is no problem regarding collegiate drinking that necessitates change. For this population, efforts to increase their awareness of the risks associated with contemporary collegiate drinking practices is appropriate, especially if tied to correcting a perception that drinking is, in and of itself, a rite of passage not to mention a venerated part of the *total* collegiate experience. Well-crafted policy and procedures can help bring all members of the campus culture—students, staff, faculty, and parents alike—to a point where they are willing to consider the possibility that change results from *acting on* the issue of collegiate drinking rather than *reacting to* it. It is this call to action that is the focus of this collection of essays.

Epilogue

One day in 1983 I encountered my six-year-old son and a friend climbing out of a large cardboard refrigerator box in the garage that was awaiting the next trash pick-up. When I asked the boys what they were doing, my son replied with absolute seriousness, "We just got back from Jupiter," and the boys went about their business of inspecting the 'ship.' Later, when the friend had gone home and Josh was upstairs, I inspected the box, inside and out. I found all types of dials and gages inscribed in crayon in a six-year-old's vision of what the bridge on a starship must look like. Not only had the boys transformed the cardboard box into a spacecraft...they had actually traveled to Jupiter!

In the long running Broadway musical production of "The Man of La Mancha," at the opening of the play, the narrator invites the audience to see Don Quixote de la Mancha, "...bony, hollow-faced, eyes that burn with the fire of inner vision. He conceives the strangest project ever imagined—to be a knight errant and sally forth into the world righting all wrongs." As he encounters objects and individuals on his journey, he attributes special meaning to each. A barber's shaving basin is perceived as the famed "golden helmet of mambrino"; a chance meeting with the prostitute Aldonza is understood to be an encounter with the Lady Dolcinea and the opportunity to champion her honor and vanquish the forces of evil that assail her.

For his troubles, Don Quixote is treated as a fool and ridiculed by all he meets except his faithful "squire," Sancho. But as the result of his dogged persistence in his beliefs and commitment to what he perceives as "truth," he succeeds in transforming the meaning Aldonza and Sancho attribute to their "realities": The shaving basin is indeed the golden helmet of mambrino, Sancho Panza *is* a squire, and the prostitute Aldonza comes to view herself as a Lady, Dolcinea.

But what have these stories to do with alcohol, high-risk drinking, and collegiate life? As with my son and Don Quixote de la Mancha, college students attribute meaning to the objects and events they encounter in the course of their everyday lives and they do this by way of their expectations and interactions with others. As a result, they are architects of their own "reality." In keeping with this, there are several ways in which the meaning students attribute to alcohol and drinking as *symbols* of their collegiate experience can translate into action-steps that institutions of higher education and their administrators are advised to consider. The suggestions that follow are intended as a means by which we can incorporate student meaning for the symbols of alcohol and drinking, contained in the rich and varied "insider" stories of our students and the perspectives these stories represent, to hasten the process of "maturing out" reported in the literature.

It is argued that accessing student stories increases the likelihood that a better understanding of the meaning they attribute to alcohol and drinking will emerge. This understanding, coupled with evidence-based strategies already in existence to curb high-risk behavior, can then be incorporated into future planning designed to impact automatic high-risk student behaviors. Discerning the meaning students attribute to alcohol and drinking can enable administrators and student affairs professionals to develop strategies by which student decisions about drinking are made on a conscious level, where they deliberately choose to not drink—or if they do, to do so in ways that are more moderate. To do so will restore the process of self-regulation and the likelihood of untoward drinking-related incidents on campus reduced.

To revisit a point made early in this monograph, all behavior passes through three stages of development: 1) control by other, 2) control by self (conscious choice), and 3) automatic (unconscious choice). If administrators and student affairs professionals can access and understand the meaning alcohol and drinking hold for students, they are better prepared to design strategies that invite their students to consciously reevaluate the meaning they have attributed to these symbols. Just as junior and senior students naturally shift from seeking out keg parties to preferring smaller groups that socialize in more intimate venues, perhaps students can be invited to reevaluate their pre-arrival expectations of collegiate life that are steeped in a perceived meaning of alcohol and drinking. Changing student behavior is important, but there are more ways to accomplish this objective than by simply trying to dissuade it or overtly confront it. Perhaps Sandra Anice Bares quote is more prophetic than any of us knew: “It is so hard [to change] when I have to, and so easy when I want to.”

Appendix A: Medical Amnesty

Resources

<http://www.whiteplainscnr.com/article1055.html>

Schools With Medical Amnesty Policies:

Cornell University → <http://www.gannett.cornell.edu/emergencies/types/map.html> University web site to advertise the policy → <http://www.medical-amnesty.cornell.edu/>

University Of Pennsylvania → <http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/ohe/library/drugs/amnesty.htm> also an article from the 13 Jan 2005 Daily Pennsylvanian → <http://www.dailypennsylvanian.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2004/09/02/4136614cb8d13>

Hanover College → <http://www.hanover.edu/life/studentlife/handbook/communityliving/alcohol.php> (scroll down to “Medical Amnesty”)

New York University → <http://www.nyu.edu/housing/residencelife/alcoholdrug.html>

Keystone College → <http://www.keystone.edu/Documents/StudentInformationGuide/Medical%20Amnesty.pdf>

Lafayette College → http://ww2.lafayette.edu/~bailey/good_samaritan.php

Schools With “Good Samaritan” Policies:

Dartmouth College → <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~deancoll/documents/handbook/rules-regs/alc-drugs.html> (section XI)

Lehigh University → http://www.lehigh.edu/~indost/dos/hbook_5.html (section VII.c)

College Misericordia → <http://www.misericordia.edu/current/studentHB/handbook2.cfm>